ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 1995

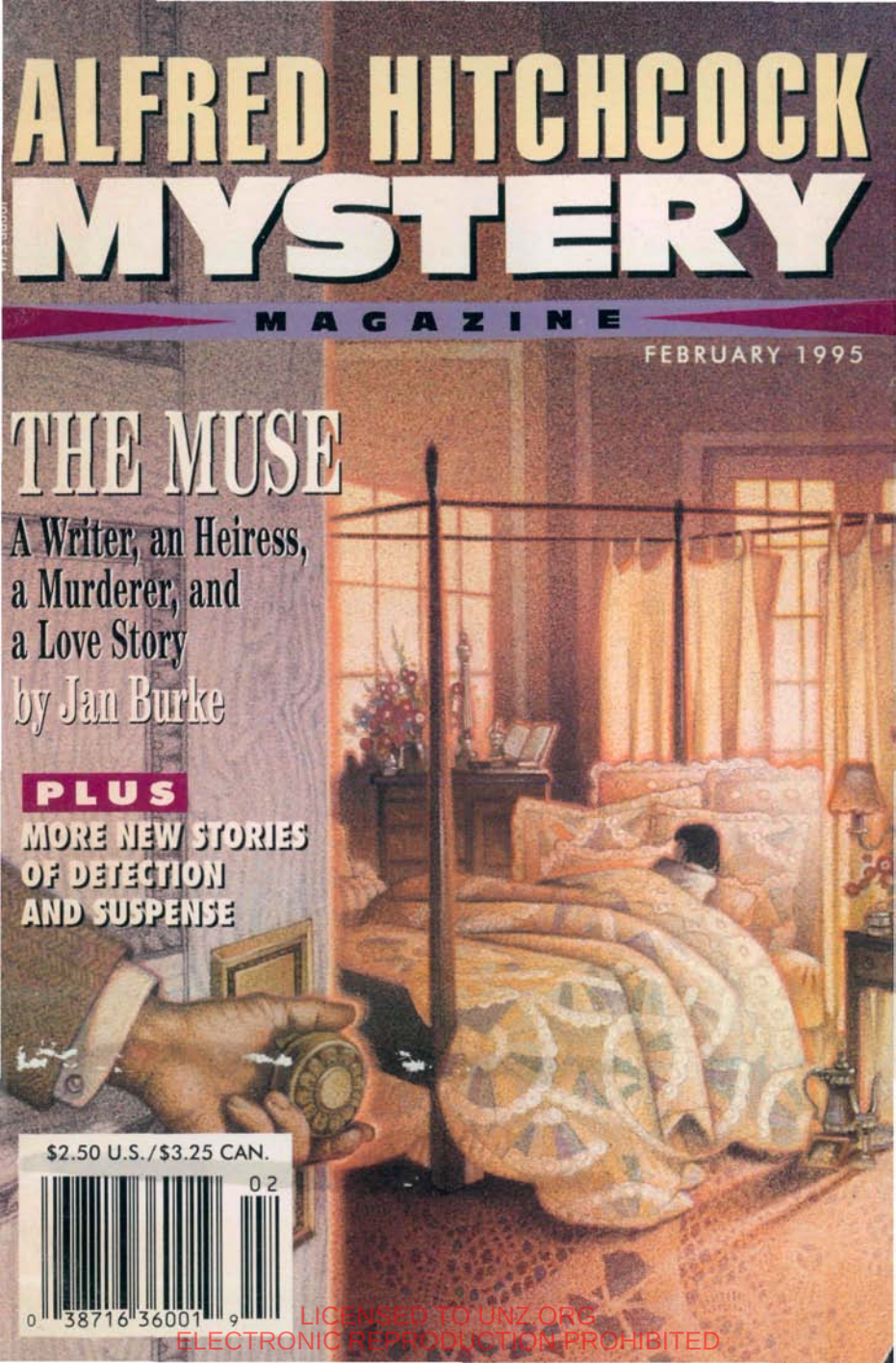
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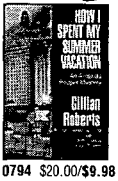
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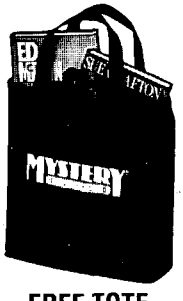
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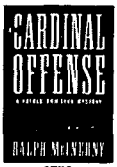
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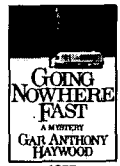
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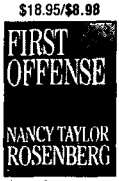
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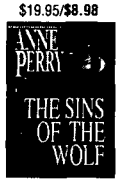
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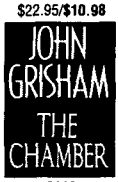
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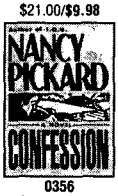
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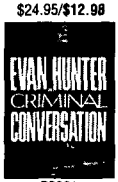
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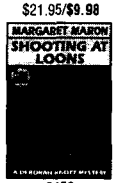
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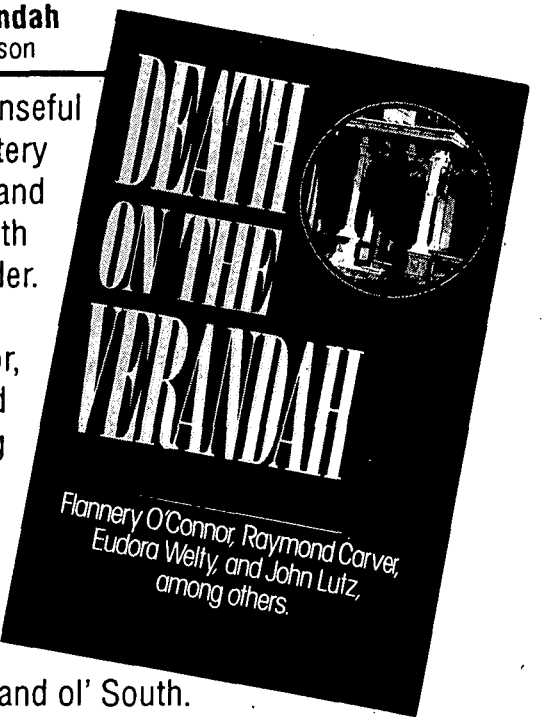
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

It has recently come to our attention that a misperception is adrift in the land, one we would like to clear up here, albeit briefly, in a note to those of you who submit stories to us.

A long time ago, for five or six years, it was the case that stories submitted to either AHMM or its sister magazine EQMM were considered for the other publication as well. In those days Eleanor Sullivan was the editor of AHMM and the managing editor of EQMM, so that practice made perfect sense.

It has not, however, been in effect for the last twelve years. *Stories submitted to AHMM are not read for, or considered by, EQMM, and vice versa.* Submissions to the two magazines must be made separately. But not simultaneously, please. (EQMM continues to accept submissions made simultaneously to other publications.)

Our readers may have seen our note in the January issue about AHMM's new online program. We promised more details. . . .

Starting in October, with D. A. McGuire's "Virtual Fog," we began a "Hitchcock's Monthly Mystery" program on CompuServe, America Online, and the Dallas-based bulletin board service Blue Event Horizon. Subscribers to any of those services can find a complete story they can download from a recent (occasionally current) issue of AHMM, and our own regular readers who are new subscribers to AHMM can catch up on some good stories they may have missed. Online in December, for instance, is

(continued on page 98)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz,** Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina,** Design Director; **Terri Czeczko,** Art Director; **Anthony Bari,** Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts,** Director of Production; **Carole Dixon,** Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson,** Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough,** Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott,** Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz,** Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones,** Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff,** Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman,** Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 782-8549. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

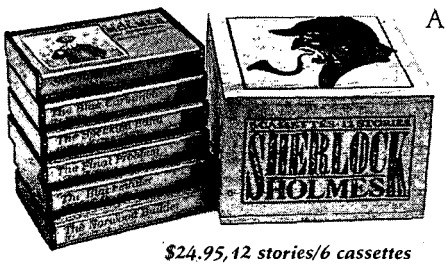
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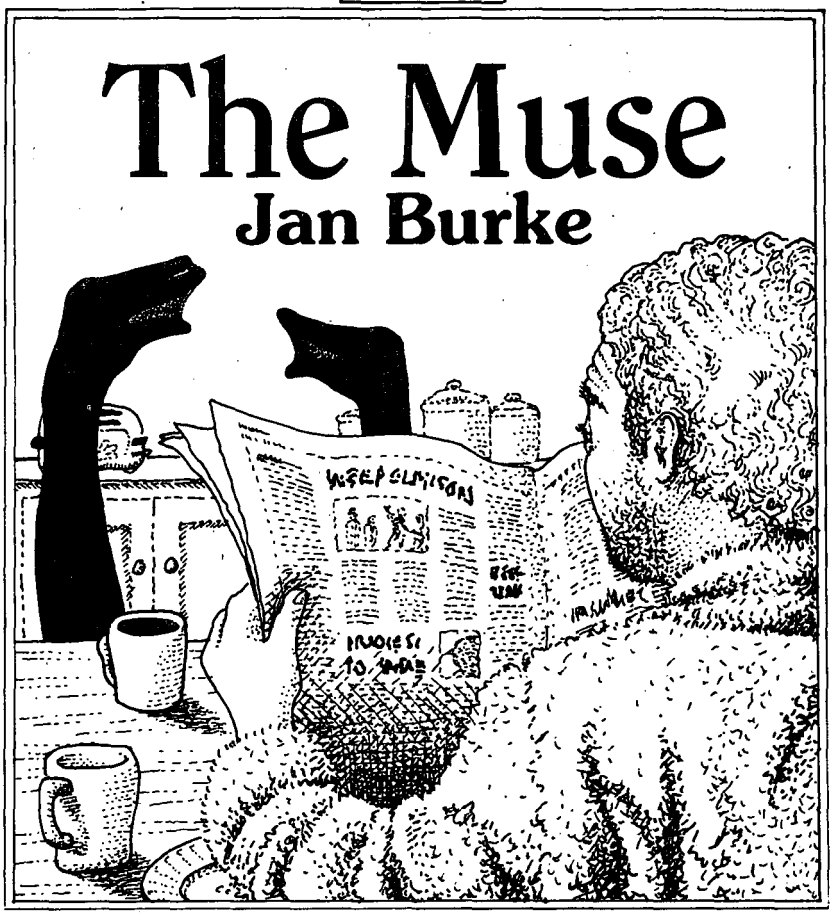
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The Muse

Jan Burke



The jet black pantyhose were calling to him. The feet of the pantyhose, to be precise. He knew he shouldn't look. Knew it would only encourage her. But he folded the edge of the newspaper down, giving in that much.

"Bee-yoll," her voice was childlike, crooning. Her puppeteer voice.

"I'm not in the mood for this, Ellie," Bill said.

"Oh, Beeeeee-yoll."

Her hands were all he could see of her, and not really much

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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of her hands. The makeshift pantyhose puppets were "looking" at each other.

"He's very angry with you," the right hand admonished the left.

"No, he's not," the left answered, then they both looked at Bill.

"I'm not angry," Bill said to the hands, giving in a little more. Addressing the puppets now. "Not really angry. Just tired."

"Quit distracting him. He's on an important deadline, and he has writer's block," the right said.

"He never has writer's block," the left replied. "He's upset about Mir."

"The prospect of a visit from Miriam is an unpleasant one," he agreed.

Ellie's head emerged above the edge of the breakfast table. He saw that she had cut the crotch out of the pantyhose, and was wearing them over her head.

"You are the strangest woman I know," he said, causing her to smile. Ellie considered this a grand endearment. Bill knew that.

Her head tilted a little to one side, as if studying him for a portrait. "It's fine now. Not even my evil twin can stop you."

"She is your younger sister, not your twin," he said, but she was leaving the table, pulling the pantyhose off.

Ellie was right, as always. Not about the twin business, of course, but about the novel he was working on. He got up from the table feeling invigorated and went straight to the computer. He had a new slant on a passage he had considered unworkable until a moment ago. This was the effect she had on him. Ellie was his Muse.

He had known she would be from the moment he first saw her. Seven years ago, well past three o'clock in the morning on a hot summer's night, at a gas station on Westwood Boulevard. Bill supposed he would forget his own name before he forgot that night.

He had been uneasy, at loose ends. It wasn't insomnia: it's only insomnia when you're trying to sleep. He had been trying to write. It was his best-kept secret then, his writing. None of his professors at UCLA, who knew him as a recent graduate in mechanical engineering, would have ever guessed it. Well-written papers and a flair for creative problem-solving didn't make him stand out as more than a good student. His friends, although from varied backgrounds and majors, held the same prejudices as the few

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women he had dated: they assumed that engineers were unlikely to read novels, let alone write them. His father, who expected him to come to work for the family company in September, was also unaware of Bill's literary aspirations.

In those days Bill thought that was for the best. If he was going to fail, he preferred not to advertise it. And while he had faith in the basic idea for his novel, he had to admit it wasn't working out. Frustrated when he stalled in that place in the manuscript where he had stalled no fewer than ten times before—where the boy ought to get the girl back again—he stood up and stretched. He needed some fresh air, he decided. At least, the freshest he could find in L.A.

And so he had restlessly made his way down to Westwood Boulevard, head down, his hands shoved down into his pockets, his long-legged gait taking him quickly past record stores and restaurants. He glanced up just to keep from running into parking meters and lampposts, glancing at but not really seeing the boutiques and movie theaters closed for the night. The gas station was closed, too, but the sight that greeted him there made him slow his stride.

A lithe young woman was tugging on one of the water hoses most people use for filling radiators. She was using it to wash a gold Rolls-Royce.

He came to a halt on the wide sidewalk, fascinated. She looked up over the hood, used the back of her hand to move her bowl-cut, thick dark hair away from her eyes. Big brown eyes.

"Want to go for a ride?" she asked him.

He nodded but didn't move forward.

"You'll have to give up hesitating if you're going to ride with me," she said, opening the driver's door. But Bill was distracted from this edict when he saw an elderly man sleeping on the front seat.

"Wake up, Harry," she said, gently nudging the old man, who came awake with a start. "We're taking . . ." She looked over her shoulder. "I'm Ellie. What's your name?"

"William. William Gray."

She turned back to the old man. "We're taking Bill here for a ride on Mulholland Drive. You can sleep in the back."

The old man reached for a cap, rubbed a gnarled hand over his face, and quickly transformed himself into a dignified chauffeur, moving to hold the passenger door open for Bill, waiting patiently as

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Bill finally moved toward the car. Harry gave a questioning look at Ellie, now behind the wheel.

"No, you need your rest."

Harry nodded and climbed into the back, asleep again before Ellie had started the car.

They had traveled Mulholland and beyond that night, climbing canyon roads that twisted and turned.

She was a good driver, calm and assured, not crazy on the winding roads. At first, he was afraid, wondering if he had made the biggest—and perhaps the final—mistake of his life. He started envisioning bold headlines: "Missing UCLA Student Found Dead," or "Still No Suspects in Topanga Canyon Torture-Murder Case." Perhaps he wouldn't be missed much. Maybe he would only rate a small article on a back page, near a department store ad: "Boy Scout Troop Makes Grisly Discovery in Canyon."

"Either you just had a big fight with your girlfriend or you're a writer," she said, not taking her eyes off the road. "I'm betting you're a writer."

He hesitated, then said, "I'm a writer. Or I want to be one. How did you guess?"

"The time of day, the way you were walking. You looked frustrated, I suppose."

"Anyone can be frustrated. Why would you think I'm a writer?"

She shrugged, then smiled a little. He waited, hoping she would answer, but she startled him by saying, "You're also a bit of a romantic."

He laughed nervously. "That's an odd thing to say."

"I am odd. But there's nothing odd about knowing a romantic when you see one. At three—" she glanced at the clock on the dash. "At approximately three twenty-five in the morning, you agreed to get into a Rolls-Royce with a sleeping old man and a woman you had never met before."

"Perhaps I just needed an adventure."

"Perhaps. Perhaps both. So, what's your favorite movie of all time?"

"Rear Window," he said without hesitation.

"Wonderful!" she said, laughing but still not taking her eyes from the road. "Whose work in it do you admire, Hitchcock's or Woolrich's?"

He smiled. Many people knew that Hitchcock directed *Rear Window*. Fewer knew that it was written by Cornell Woolrich. "Both, really," he answered. "I'm a fan of both. I've seen every Hitchcock film, with the exception of a few of the very early British ones."

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Soon they were discussing Hitchcock and Woolrich, and Bill forgot all about Boy Scouts and headlines. She had seen most of the films he had seen, read more Woolrich.

He eased back into the passenger seat, studying her. She didn't make a move toward him, didn't reach across the seat, didn't even look at him much. Every so often, finding a vista she liked, Ellie would stop the car. The first time she stopped, Bill expected her to turn her attention to him. But she didn't do more than glance at him. "Just look at it," she said, gesturing to the carpet of city lights below. Soon he realized that was all she would ask of him—just to look at it.

At one of these turnouts, she kicked off her shoes and rolled down a window, resting her bare feet on the sill. She drove barefooted the rest of the night.

She asked him questions. He talked more that night than he had ever talked in his life. About his writing, his family, his childhood, his love of Woolrich stories and Hitchcock films and chocolate and on and on, even describing the furniture in his apartment.

"And you?" he asked. "Where do you live?"

"Somewhere in these hills. Perhaps I'll take you there someday."

As many questions as she asked, and as few as she answered, somehow she still managed to make him feel that he was of vital interest to her. Not in the way some questioners might—scientists studying an insect—but as if she had cared about him from before the time she had met him. He was wondering at the trust he had placed in this stranger as dawn was coming up over the hills. She had parked the car on a ridge. Harry was snoring softly. "I'll take you home," she said.

"I'm not sure I want to go home," Bill answered, then quickly added, "Sorry, I don't mean to be pushy. You've been a great listener. You're probably tired and—"

She reached over then and laid a finger to his lips. She shook her head, and he stopped talking, unsure of what she was saying no to.

She took him back to his apartment, leaving Harry asleep in the car.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked on his doorstep.

She shook her head, an impish smile on her lips. "I know exactly what it looks like—I'm sure you've described it perfectly. Besides, you're very busy. You've got to get a little sleep, and then you'll wake up

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and write your book. It's going to be terrific, but no one will ever find that out until you write it." She turned and skipped back to the car.

"Will I see you again?" he called out.

"Stop worrying," she called back. "Write!"

And he had. He slept about three hours, woke up feeling like he had slept ten, and wondering if he had dreamed the woman in the Rolls-Royce. But dream or no dream, he suddenly knew how to get around that problem in his story, and went to work.

Harry appeared a few hours later, a picnic basket in hand. "Miss Eleanor sends her regards, and provisions so that you need not interrupt your work."

"You can talk!" Bill exclaimed.

"When necessary," Harry said, and left.

Bill searched through the basket, and found an assortment of small sandwiches, a salad, a slice of chocolate cake, and several choices of beverages. He also found an old fashioned calling card:

Miss Eleanor Wingate

On the back she had inscribed her phone number.

"Delicious," Bill said, holding it carefully as if it might skip away, disappear as quickly as she had.

And so he went back to writing. Bill saw little of Ellie during the weeks that followed their ride through the hills, but he called her often. If he found himself staring uselessly at the place where the wall behind his computer screen met the ceiling, unsure how to proceed, a brief chat with Ellie inspired him. They played a game with Hitchcock films and Woolrich stories.

"A jaguar," he would say.

" 'Black Alibi,' " she would answer. "A name scrawled on a window."

"Easy—*The Lady Vanishes.*"

And his writer's block would vanish as well.

When Bill completed his manuscript, Harry took him and the manuscript to her house for the first time. Bill, trying (and failing) not to be overawed by the elegance that surrounded him, handed her the box of pages. She caressed the corners of the box, looking for a moment as if she might cry. But she said nothing, and set it gently aside without opening it. She held out her hand, and he took it. She led him upstairs.

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Later, waking in the big bed, he found her watching him. "Did you read it?"

"No," she said, tracing a finger along his collarbone. "I don't want any misunderstandings about why you're here. It's not because of what's in that manuscript box."

He savored the implications of that for a moment before insecurities besieged him, "Maybe you'd hate it anyway."

"I couldn't."

It was the last time they talked about the manuscript for three days. At the end of those three days, he mailed it to an agent, called his father to say he'd found other work, packed up his belongings, and moved in with Ellie.

The agent called back, took him on as a client, and sold the book within a week. Bill was already at work on his second novel. The first one was a critically acclaimed but modest success. The second spent twenty-five weeks on the bestseller list. When Bill got his first royalty check, he asked Ellie to marry him.

She gently but firmly refused. She also refused after books three, four, and five—all bestsellers.

Today, as he finished the chapter he was working on, he wondered if she would ever tell him why. Ellie could be very obstinate, he knew. If she didn't want to give him a straight answer, she would make up something so bizarre and absurd that he would know to stop asking.

"There was a clause in my parents' will," she said once. "If I marry before my fiftieth birthday, the house must be turned into an ostrich farm."

"And the courts accepted that?" he played along.

"Absolutely. The trust funds would go to ostriches, and Mir would be very unhappy with you for putting an end to her healthy allowance."

"Your parents would have left Miriam a pauper?"

"She thinks she's a pauper on what I give her now."

"A pauper? On ten thousand dollars a month?"

"Pin money for Mir. We grew up rich, remember?"

"Hard to forget. Why not give it all to Miriam and live on my money instead?"

She frowned. "I'd be dependent on you."

"So what? I was dependent on you when I first lived here."

"For about four months. And you had your own money, you just didn't need any of it. Do you want to be married for more than four months?"

"Of course."

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"So now you see why we can't be married at all."

He didn't but he resigned himself to the situation. She probably would never tell him why she wouldn't marry him, or why she allowed Miriam, who often upset her, to come to the house on a regular basis to plead for more money.

"Where's Harry?" Miriam demanded when Bill answered the doorbell.

"On the phone," Bill explained as he took her coat. "He's placing ads for a cook and housekeeper."

"Not again," Miriam said.

"The last ones managed to stay on for about six weeks," Bill said easily.

Miriam turned her most charming smile upon him. She was gorgeous, Bill thought, not for the first time. A redhead with china blue eyes and a figure that didn't need all that custom tailoring to show it off. What was she, he wondered? A walking ice sculpture, perhaps? But he discarded that image. After all, sooner or later, ice melted.

"I don't know why you stay with her, Bill," Miriam purred, misreading his attention.

Bill heard a door open in a hallway above them.

"If you're here for a favor," he said in a low voice, "you're not being very kind to your benefactor."

Miriam stood frowning, waiting until she heard the door close again. Still, she whispered when she said, "Even *you* must admit that she drives the entire household to distraction."

"Yes," he said, thinking back to the night he met Ellie. "But distraction isn't always such a bad place to go."

"She's crazy," Miriam said scornfully. "And a liar!"

"She's neither. What brings you by this afternoon?" They were halfway up the stairs now, and although Bill thought Ellie was probably past being injured by Miriam's remarks, he didn't know how much longer his own patience would last.

Miriam pointed one perfectly shaped red fingernail at him. "How can you say she's not a liar? She once told you Harry was her father."

"She knew I wouldn't believe it. She never tells me any lie she thinks I might believe. Come on, she's waiting."

Bill had heard Ellie cross into one of the upstairs staging rooms. This meant, he knew, that she had staged some clues for him, placed objects about the room intended to remind him of specific Hitchcock movies. It was an extension of the

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old game they played, and one of the reasons that housekeepers didn't last long. The last one left after finding a mannequin, unclad except for Harry's cap, sitting in the bathtub. (*"The Trouble With Harry,"* Bill had said, earning praise from Ellie even as they tried to revive the fainting housekeeper.)

Ellie, knowing Miriam hated the game, always had one ready when her sister came to visit.

Wearing a pair of jeans with holes in the knees, Ellie was sitting crosslegged on top of a large mahogany table, passing a needle and thread through colored miniature marshmallows to make a necklace. She smiled as she moved the needle through a green marshmallow.

"How much this time?" she asked without looking up.

"Ellie darling! So good to see you."

Ellie glanced at Bill. "Too many Bette Davis movies." She chose a pink marshmallow next.

"What on earth are you doing? And why are you wearing those horrid clothes?"

"Shhh!" Ellie said, now reaching for a yellow marshmallow.

Bill was looking around the room. As usual in a game, there were many oddball objects and antiques in the room. The trick was to find the clues among the objects. "How many altogether?"

"Three," Ellie answered.

"Oh! This stupid game. I might have known," Miriam grumbled.

He saw the toy windmill first.

"Foreign Correspondent," he said.

"One down, two to go," Ellie laughed. "How much money this time, Mir?"

"I didn't come here to ask for money," Miriam said, sitting down.

Bill looked over at her in surprise, then went back to the game.

Searching through the bric-a-brac that covered a low set of shelves, he soon found the next clue: three small plaster of Paris sculptures of hands and wrists. A man's hand and a woman's hand were handcuffed together; another male hand, missing part of its little finger, stood next to the handcuffed set. *"The Thirty-Nine Steps."*

"Bravo, Bill. Of course you came here for money, Mir. You always do."

"Not this time."

"What then?" Ellie asked, watching as Bill picked up a music box from a small dressing table.

"I want to move back home."

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Ellie stopped stringing marshmallows. Bill set the music box down.

Don't give in, Ellie, he prayed silently.

"No," Ellie said, and went back to work on her necklace. Bill's sigh of relief was audible.

"Ellie, please, I'm your sister."

"I'll buy you a place to live."

"I want to live here."

"Why?"

"It's in the will. I can live here if I want to."

Ellie looked up. "We had an agreement."

Miriam glanced nervously toward Bill, then said, "It's my home, too, you know. You've allowed a perfect stranger to live here. Well, I don't deserve any less."

"Why do you want to come back, Mir? You haven't lived here in years."

"I think it's time we grew closer as sisters, that's all."

Ellie only laughed at that. Bill was heartened by the laughter. Ellie was protective of Miriam, had a soft spot for her despite her abuses. But if that sister plea didn't get through to her, maybe there was a chance . . .

"Look, you've been living up here in grand style," Miriam said petulantly, "and I just want to enjoy a bit of it myself."

Bill saw Ellie's mood shifting, saw her glancing over at him. He felt awkwardness pulling ahead of his curiosity by a nose. He decided to leave this discussion to the sisters. It was Ellie's house, after all. She could do as she liked. He started to edge out of the room, but Ellie said, "This concerns you, too, Bill. Don't leave."

He wasn't put off by what others might have taken to be a commanding tone. In seven years, he had never heard the word "please" come out of her mouth. Although he thought of few things as certain when it came to Ellie, one certainty was that she rarely asked anything of others. Knowing this, he treated any request as if there were an implied "please."

"This isn't his house!" Miriam shouted.

"Lower your voice. He is my guest and welcome here."

Bill turned away, forced himself to look again at the objects on the dressing table.

Ellie went on. "You spent all of your inheritance in less than two years, Mir. Grandfather knew you were like our parents."

Bill knew this part of the story. Their grandfather had raised the girls after their parents—wild, spoiled, and reckless, according to Ellie—were killed in a car wreck. While

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Miriam received a large inheritance, Ellie's grandfather had left the house and most of his money to Ellie, thinking Miriam too much like his late daughter.

"Don't start speaking ill of the dead," Miriam protested to Ellie.

"All right, I won't. But the fact remains . . ."

"That you've made money and I've lost all of mine. Don't rub it in, Ellie. Now I've even lost the condo."

"I know."

"You know? Then you understand why I want to live here."

"Not really. But this time I'll keep the title so you can't mortgage it endlessly."

"I want to live here. This is my home!"

"Fine. Then you won't get another dime from me."

Bill watched in the dressing table mirror as Miriam swallowed hard, then lifted her chin. "All right, if that's what you want to do. My bags are in the car. Harry can pick up the rest of my things—"

"No!" Ellie interrupted sharply, clenching her hands, smushing part of her marshmallow necklace. She shook her head, then said more calmly, "You won't badger that man. I swear you won't be allowed to live here if you do. I'll sell this place first."

"All right, all right. I won't cause trouble, Ellie. You'll see. I'll even bring my cook and housekeeper with me. That will save Harry a lot of work."

Bill was hardly paying attention by then. He was nettled. So nettled, he didn't offer to help Miriam with her bags as she left the room. He kept his back to Ellie, pretending to be caught up in the game again.

My guest. It was accurate enough, he supposed. Not "my lover." Not "my friend." Not "the man I want to spend my life with." My guest. He picked up the music box again.

"You've got a burr under your saddle, Bill. What is it?"

He ignored her for a moment, lifting the lid of the music box. It played "The Merry Widow Waltz."

He heard Ellie sigh behind him. "I'm not happy about it, either," she said, "but there's nothing I can do. Perhaps having Miriam here won't be so bad."

He closed the lid of the music box. *"Shadow of a Doubt,"* he said, and schooled his features into a smile before turning toward her. "Thank you for all the effort, Ellie. It's always an amusing game."

She looked puzzled. He hadn't fooled her, of course. Belatedly he realized that she must have watched him in the

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mirror. But if she could be obstinate, well, by damn, so could he. He excused himself and left the room.

As he paid the tab in a bar that evening, Bill had to acknowledge that the slight had escalated into silent warfare, and much of it was probably his fault. He had not yet managed to tell Ellie how she had given offense. In one moment, it seemed of so little importance that he was ashamed of himself for thinking about it at all. In the next moment, it seemed to stand as a perfect symbol for everything that was wrong between them. There were several drinks between moments. But in the end he had firmly resolved to talk to her, not to let one comment ruin all they had shared until then.

Bill looked up to see a familiar figure coming toward him. Not the one he most wanted to see, but close enough. Harry had come to fetch him.

"Did she send you for me, Harry?" Bill asked, allowing Harry to lead him outside.

"No, sir."

"You came on your own?" he asked in surprise. Harry had never indicated approval of Bill, a lack Bill took to mean disapproval.

"No, sir," Harry replied, but Bill noticed that the old man actually seemed a little embarrassed to admit it. Harry gently guided him into the back seat of the Rolls.

Bill waited until Harry got into the car. He felt as if he might be sick, but he fought it off. "Why'd you come after me?"

"Miss Miriam suggested it. She has many suggestions, sir."

Bill signaled him to wait, opened the door, and spared the upholstery.

Harry drove him home, windows down. But even during the long ride, Bill had sobered little. He made it into the house under his own steam and began the climb up the stairs. He swayed a bit as he reached for the bedroom doorknob, twisted it, and found it locked. He stared at it in his hand, as if somehow he were just doing it wrong, this simple act of opening a door.

Harry came in then and, quietly coming up the stairs, asked in a whisper if Bill might need some assistance. Bill was hanging onto the knob, staring dumbly at the door. Harry tried the knob, then murmured, "It's locked, sir. Perhaps . . ." but his voice broke off as they heard another door open.

Miriam, clad in a nightgown that seemed to offer little difference from sleeping in the nude, smiled and called out, "Ellie left some things for you

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outside the bedroom off your office downstairs. I guess you're in the doghouse tonight, Billy Boy."

"You seem happy to hear it," Bill said, trying to stand up straight. Having this greedy woman in the household would sorely try him. Harry stepped aside as Miriam came closer. Miriam tried to put an arm around Bill, giggling when he clumsily pushed her hand from his waist. She stepped back.

"Why do you two stay together?" she asked. "Ellie doesn't seem interested. I could see why you tried to win her over at first, but now—well, why bother? You've got plenty of money. Most women would consider you quite a catch."

"For your information," Bill said, his drunken state not obscuring her intentions, "I wouldn't make any money without your sister. If I leave her, I can't write. She's my Muse."

Whatever reply Miriam might have made was lost when a loud crash sounded against the other side of the bedroom door.

"Ellie! Are you all right?" Bill called frantically.

"Go to hell!" came Ellie's voice from the other side.

Bill heard Miriam giggle behind him as she closed her bedroom door.

*

"Don't do this, sir."

Bill was so taken aback by Harry's plea that he stopped packing for a moment. But he shook his head and latched the suitcase.

"Sorry, Harry. I can take the silent treatment, and finding out that she threw a portrait of me against the door that night. I can even take the blame for starting this. But I can't stay here if she doesn't trust me."

Until that afternoon Bill hadn't heard a word from Ellie in three days. After that first morning, when Harry brought Bill's clothes into the bedroom adjoining Bill's office, Bill hadn't tried to go back to the room he had shared with her. He had heard her move about in her office, just on the other side of the wall. Each day she had gone from her room to her office and back again, speaking only to Miriam or Harry. Miriam, suddenly the solicitous sister, would take meals to Ellie in her room. Bill tried to ignore it, told himself her temper would cool and he would be able to tell her just how much she meant to him, that she was much more to him than the means to an end. Until then he would keep his distance.

But this morning she had ventured outside the house, asking Harry to take her for a

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ride. They had been gone for about an hour when Bill heard someone rustling papers in her office and went to investigate. Miriam was bent over some documents on Ellie's desk, pen in hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked, startling her.

"None of your business."

He moved closer, and she snatched one of the pages off the desk and wadded it up in her hand.

"Why are you in Ellie's office?" he asked, glancing at a contract Ellie had signed, the document Miriam had been studying.

"I said, none of your business."

He reached out and grabbed the hand with the paper in it. She clawed at his face, struggling furiously, but he caught both of her wrists and squeezed until she let the paper drop. He bent to pick it up even as Miriam ran crying from the room.

He sat down at the desk, ignoring the sting of the scratches. The contract was nothing unusual, he noted, as he smoothed the paper out. Ellie's signature was on the scrap. But as he studied it closer, he realized it was *almost* Ellie's signature.

A tearful voice took his attention from the paper. "I caught him trying to forge your signature. I grabbed the paper he was practicing on, and he attacked me!"

He looked up to see Ellie staring at him in disbelief.

"Ellie . . ." he protested, standing up.

"Did you do this to her?"

She held out Miriam's wrists. There were dark red marks on them.

"Yes, but Ellie . . . "

"I don't want to hear it!"

She led Miriam from the room, consoling her.

And so he left the house in the hills. He had no trouble finding a house to rent. He told himself he only rented one because he was too busy finishing his manuscript to do serious househunting. Never mind that he was finished before his deadline. While waiting for his editor's response, he began outlining another work, writing character sketches. He told himself this productivity was a sign that he was readjusting, living a new life.

But he knew that wasn't the truth. The truth was, he wrote because writing was all he had left. He felt closer to her when he wrote, even as he told himself he didn't miss her. But that was the biggest lie of all.

When his editor proclaimed the new manuscript Bill's best

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work, Bill didn't feel the sense of elation such praise might have once brought. Ellie wasn't his link to writing after all. It wasn't inspiration he missed; it was Ellie herself.

He found himself on Westwood Boulevard at three in the morning, staring at the place where the gas station had been. It was gone, transformed into a parking lot. But as he stared, a gold Rolls-Royce pulled into the empty lot. For a moment, his heart leapt. But then he saw that Harry was driving.

Alone.

It wasn't the first time he had seen Harry. Harry kept tabs on him, he knew. In the beginning, he thought she might have asked Harry to do so, then realized that Harry only appeared on his day off. Harry seldom spoke to him and never mentioned Ellie. But it seemed to Bill that Harry was looking older each time he encountered him.

"Evening, sir."

"Hello, Harry." And then, breaking a promise he had made to himself, he asked, "How is she?"

Harry seemed to perk up a bit. He studied Bill's face, then seemed to make up his mind about something. "She's not well, sir."

"Not well?"

"No, sir."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

Harry was silent.

"Harry, did she put you up to this? Is she trying to get me to come back? Because I'm doing just fine on my own now."

Harry shook his head. "You disappoint me, sir." He stepped back to the car.

"Harry, wait."

Harry waited.

"Does she know you watch over me?"

"No, sir. But for some time now she has . . . I mean to say, sir, that whatever has gone before, at present she may be too ill to contact you herself."

Bill frowned. "I don't like hearing that she's ill."

Harry stayed silent.

"I know she dislikes doctors. Has she been to a doctor about this illness?"

"Miss Miriam has supplied a doctor, sir. He often comes to the house to care for Miss Eleanor."

"Oh." He looked away from Harry's studying gaze for a moment. "Well, I don't suppose . . . that is, if Miriam has found a doctor who will make a house call, I don't suppose Ellie needs me for anything."

Harry hesitated, then said, "Permit me to say, sir, that I'm not certain Miss Eleanor has done well under this physician's care."

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"Tell her that you saw me," Bill said. "Tell her that you saw me here. She'll know what that means. Tell her to—to let me know if she needs me."

Bill didn't sleep at all that night. If she were seriously ill . . .

He hesitated until late the next afternoon, then called the house. Miriam answered.

"Miriam, this is Bill."

"Bill the caterer? Terrific. About this evening . . . "

"No, no. Bill Gray. Let me talk to Ellie, please."

"Oh, that Bill." After a long pause, Miriam said, "She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Let me hear her say that herself."

"Listen, she has a new man in her life. One who doesn't cause so many problems. We're having a dinner party tonight, and he's the guest of honor. So I really don't think you're someone she wants to talk to."

The line went dead.

A new man. He half believed it. If the wrenching in his gut was any indication, he believed it more than half. But Harry said she was ill, seeing a doctor. Why would she throw a dinner party if she wasn't well? Why would Harry look for him if she was seeing someone else?

Not much later, he heard a car pull into his driveway. Bill looked out the window to see the Rolls. He hurried out the front door when he saw the look of worry on Harry's face.

"Is she all right?" Bill asked.

"Sir, I'm to give you this."

Harry pressed a key into Bill's palm.

"There is a dinner party tonight, sir. I believe the persons in attendance are interested in acquiring the house and surrounding properties."

"Ellie is selling the house?"

"No, sir. But there now exist documents that say Miss Miriam is given power of attorney over the sale of the house, due to her sister's ill health. And indeed, her sister is ill."

Bill looked down at the key.

"She said you could win the game, sir. Do you know what she means?"

"The game? The Hitchcock game. It must be *Notorious*."

"The game is notorious, sir?"

"No, Harry. *Notorious* is a Hitchcock film. Claude Rains plays one of the leaders of a group of Nazi scientists living in Brazil. They're trying to build an atom bomb. Ingrid Bergman has married him, but as he discovers, she's an American spy working with Cary Grant."

"Does the key give you some clue about her health, sir?"

"No," Bill said absently, "but in a Hitchcock film, the story is

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always larger than the objects that become the focus of the suspense."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Bill continued to stare at the key. "The key is to a wine cellar, where an important secret is kept. But the film isn't really about spies and secrets. Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman are in love, but misunderstandings and mistrust stand between them. It isn't until the end of the film, when he realizes that . . ." Bill suddenly looked up at Harry. "Harry, when you said she was ill . . . oh no. Get me to the house at once! Drive like a bat out of hell!"

Harry complied. As they drove, Bill asked him questions that made Harry wonder if the young man had somehow spoken to Miss Eleanor, even though Miss Miriam had taken the phone out of Eleanor's room long ago. Bill asked about Miss Eleanor's symptoms, and every time Harry said, "Yes, sir; she's had terrible stomach cramps," or "Yes, sir, very dizzy," Bill seemed to grow more frantic.

"Keep the motor running," he said as they pulled into the drive. "I'll be out in a minute."

Bill burst through the front door, nearly knocking a startled maid off her feet. He could hear voices in the dining room, but he didn't bother with the dinner party in progress. He ran up the stairs.

"Sir!" the maid called. "You can't go up there!"

He ignored her.

His only moment of hesitation came as he stepped inside Ellie's bedroom and saw her for the first time in a month. He had expected to find her bedroom door locked but quickly realized why it wasn't.

She was too ill to run away.

He forced himself to move again, went quickly to her side. Her skin was jaundiced, and she was so thin, almost skeletal, he thought, then pushed the thought away. Her hair, her beautiful hair, was dull in color and missing in patches. Her breathing was steady but rasping. He put his hands beneath her and lifted her frail body from the bed, keeping the blanket wrapped around her. He told himself that self-recrimination must wait.

Her big brown eyes were open now, watching him.

"Good to see you," she whispered.

"My God, Ellie." He tried to gather his wits. "How long has she been poisoning you?"

"Little at a time," she said, wincing as she spoke.

"Don't talk now, not if it hurts. Has it just been since I left?"

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She nodded, the effort seeming to wear her out.

A month. A month of arsenic. "I'm not leaving again, Ellie. Except to take you with me."

She continued to watch him, but now the barest smile came to her lips.

He had started down the stairs when Miriam, dinner party in tow, entered the foyer.

"What are you doing?" Miriam screeched.

"I'm taking her to a hospital. To see a real doctor. You had better pray to God that I'm not too late."

Miriam tried to block his way. "She's too ill to move! You have no business . . ."

"Careful, Miriam," he said in a low voice. "She's awake and lucid. Shall we discuss this in front of your guests, or do you want to wait until after Harry describes your so-called doctor to the gents at the sheriff's office? Ellie's bloodwork will probably give them all they need to go after both of you."

Miriam paled, then stepped out of the way.

"What's going on here?" one of the guests demanded.

"My sister's . . ."

"Fiancé," Bill supplied as he reached the front door. "Her fiancé is taking her to a hospital."

The group followed him toward the car. He wasn't watching them. He was watching Ellie. She moved her hand, covered his with it. Her skin was cool and paper dry. "You're safe now, Ellie," he told her.

"I'm coming with you!" Miriam said, hearing the guests murmuring behind her.

"No, you aren't, miss," Harry said, helping Bill into the back seat.

"She's her sister!" one of guests protested.

"Her sister will remain here with you," Bill said. "She wants to tell you about a Hitchcock film."

"What are you talking about?" another man asked.

"Notorious," Bill said, closing the car door.

"You've won, sir, haven't you?" Harry said as they drove off.

"I've had help," Bill replied. "All along, I've had help."

Ellie squeezed his hand.

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"GHOSTS," HE SAID

Steve Lindley



Illustration by Richard Loehle

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"Ghosts?" I asked, though I don't know why I bothered. With Joey, it was always ghosts. The netherworld held the answers to all the questions he found too complex to ponder.

"I hear them. At night." He picked up a small stone, examined its smooth face. We were sitting on the cement block breaker wall at the south end of Howard Beach, its thin strip of sand a foot below the soles of our sneakers.

"What do they say?" I asked him.

"Say? They don't say anything. That's not how ghosts work at all." He drew his arm back, threw the stone into the white of a breaking wave. It was early October, and the waves were high. The wind coming off Lake Michigan was cold. "I hear them moving around. Upstairs, in the empty apartment. The floorboards creaking. And other sounds, strange sounds."

I looked over my shoulder at the building in which Joey and his parents lived, one in a line of three-flats butted up against the lake in East Rogers Park at Chicago's northernmost tip. Unlike the comfortable, squat, brick apartments where my family lived, these once grand structures were built of stone at the turn of the century. With their ridiculously high ceilings, chipped marble mantels over bricked-up fireplaces, painted-over ceiling outlets that teased of stolen chandeliers, and french windows that howled on windy nights with the sound of doves mourning the dead, it was no wonder Joey believed in ghosts. Still, the apartment above his, once occupied by Daniel Cunningham and his mother, had been empty since July.

"Maybe old man McKrell finally rented out—"

"There's nobody there. I checked."

"You checked for sure? Or you just checked?"

"I went through the place. Yesterday morning."

"You broke in?" I asked, envying his audacity, at the same time angry that he had not invited me along on such a venture.

"I didn't break anything," he said, mistaking my tone. "There ain't a window on the beach side of the building that closes right, much less locks. I just climbed out on the third floor porch rail and let myself in the kitchen window. There's nothing there. No people or any sign of them. No furniture. Just empty rooms and dust. And ghosts."

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I slipped down off the wall, landed in the sand, not going anywhere, simply feeling the need to move. Maybe it was the talk of ghosts, more likely Joey's description of the place's emptiness, but the conversation was making me uncomfortable. I couldn't imagine the apartment empty. My memory of it was the afternoons Joey and I had spent with Daniel at his mother's kitchen table, the room brightly lit from the ceiling fixture over our heads and warmed by the stove as she boiled up hot chocolate and served it beside her homemade pound cake so sweet you could feel the grit of the sugar in your teeth.

Joey, Daniel, and I had spent every day of late spring and early summer on or around Howard Beach. I remembered the last week of June when Danny had told us he and his mother were moving to the west side, and the excitement of the morning of July first as Joey and I helped the two of them load up the U-Haul, carrying what little furniture they owned down the back stairs, then running back up to take more directions from Mrs. Cunningham, who knelt on the living room floor, a thin scarf shielding her hair from the dust, taping up the next box for us to carry down. And I remembered how that excitement had so suddenly died into empty silence after we had said our goodbyes and Joey and I had chased the rented truck down Birchwood to Sheridan where it turned and disappeared into traffic.

I walked out toward the water, my hands in my pockets. Looking out on a lake the size of Lake Michigan, one might as well be standing at the edge of an ocean. I thought of all the nights since Daniel had gone when I had lain in bed wishing I had jumped onto the back of that truck. Although Daniel didn't know it, he had been a part of my plan to leave home that summer, to leave Chicago forever and finish my education around the globe. With Daniel now gone, I had nothing to look forward to but the sixth grade at St. Theresa's.

Daniel had been talking all spring of the impending return of his Uncle Willie. I had met Mrs. Cunningham's brother a few times in the past during his short stays with the Cunninghams when his travels brought him back through the Chicago area.

Uncle Willie was a large man with a mess of hair on his head and tattoos on his arms, drawings of half-naked women who danced when he flexed his muscles. He also had scars on his

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arms and back which he would show us against Mrs. Cunningham's protests. Each scar had a story, one we had heard many times before but would listen to again as he sat back and poured beer from a can into a frosted mug.

Daniel's Uncle Willie made his living as a professional adventurer, traveling through foreign countries or over oceans searching for treasures lost, stolen, or discarded. The long cut on his left forearm had been formed by a jagged rock when his guide had left him dangling off a cliff in the Ahaggar Mountains of Algeria, taking the golden Béchar Chalice with him. The smaller, but uglier, wound on his lower back had come from a dagger wielded by a doublecrossing Iraqi skipper on the Tigris River. And his weathered, gnarled fingers told the story of the frostbite he had suffered when his compass was stolen by gypsies in the Northwest Territories and he had to carry his last surviving sled dog across the frozen tundra to Fort McPherson.

Naturally, it didn't take me long to decide it was my destiny to follow Uncle Willie in his profession. And, last September, the last time I saw him before he headed off to Africa in search of ivory smugglers, I summoned up the courage to tell him my plans. I waited until the two of us were alone and talked fast, trying to convince him my parents wouldn't miss me, arguing that I had already learned more than a Catholic grammar school had to teach. He listened and, for a moment, when he lifted his arm to put it around my shoulders, I thought he might congratulate me on my decision. Instead he gripped the back of my neck hard and drew my face close to his.

"You forget your notions," he told me in a harsh tone I had never heard from him before. "Stay home, instead, and finish school like the way I should have done. An adventurer's life is a tough and lonely one. You think my tattoos are fun and my scars exciting, but every tattoo is a mark on me and the cuts that others have put on my body still hurt, and the home little Daniel's mother makes for me on my visits is the best I've come across anywhere in the world I've been. So, you forget what you just said for the good of us both, and don't go mouthing these goofy thoughts to Daniel none, neither."

With that, he released his grip, and I had to turn away to hide the wet in my eyes. He touched me again, this time more softly, and the laughter returned to his voice, and he told me that if I still felt this

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way after graduating from high school, he would think about taking me with him, but that I had to learn as much as I could until then if I was to survive in the world through which he traveled.

And so my hopes were put on hold, only to vanish with the Cunninghams' U-Haul truck as it left East Rogers Park forever.

I walked back to the breaker wall, back to Joey, and spat at about the spot where my heels had been kicking. "It's just McKrell you're hearing," I told him. "Painting and cleaning up the place for the next tenant."

"What I hear ain't paintbrushes. And nobody cleans in the middle of the night." Joey leaned forward, his motion of secret sharing begging me close. "I hear groans," he whispered over the sound of the waves. "Groans that turn into screams. It only lasts a short time, two or three hours maybe. I lie there in bed in the dark and listen to them, waiting for them to quit. When they do, I lie there some more, wide awake, to make sure they don't start up again. They don't. Until the next night." He picked up another stone, gave me a cold glare intended to cause a shiver. "It's ghosts for sure this time."

"You're crazy for sure," I told him, noticing the sun already beginning to set. "All the time." The nights were coming earlier. Soon there would not be enough time between the schoolday's end and sunset to even come down to the beach.

"You spend a night in my room," he said. "You'll claim different."

I left him, promising nothing, and managed to be home just before dark, a strict rule, the neighborhood being what it was these days, or so my mother claimed. I passed the hour before dinner in my room, my homework on my desk, me on my stomach on the floor going through my comic book and trading card collections. I studied the better half of a Batman comic, one of the pre-film frenzy sleepers I had taken in trade from Daniel. In return for this and others, I had traded ten of my Iron Man comics, classic 1981, all in sequence, February through November. I thought of how I would never see those Iron Man comics again, and that feeling of loss made me remember that Daniel was gone forever as well, causing me to experience that chill Joey had attempted to spur earlier on the beach. My sadness was suddenly so overwhelming it followed me to the

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dinner table where my mother was quick to pick up on it.

"The new schoolyear's hardly started," she told me, and if she was trying to cheer me up, she was doing a poor job of it. The period between summer's end and Christmas was interminable and the markets were only just decorated for Halloween. I changed the subject quickly. The only thing I could think of bringing up was Joey's predicament. I told my parents about the noises he was hearing at night.

"Well," my father said, working his fork to keep the pool of gravy in the center of his mashed potatoes. "If Joey says it's ghosts, it must be ghosts."

My mother, cutting my younger sister's meat into pieces, brought up McKrell, used all the arguments I had against Joey earlier, and I found myself taking his position with the same vehemence he had shown against me. Finally, my father stopped chewing and took a long drink of milk.

"It could be squatters," he said. "The place has stood empty for months now. I'm sure that hasn't gone unnoticed."

"Then it's McKrell's own fault," my mother said. "His rents are outrageous. That's why the Cunninghams had to move out in the first place. If he'd lower—"

But my father shook his head. "And allow the kinds of element we've got just west of here to move in closer to the lake? This neighborhood is falling apart fast enough as it is. McKrell's doing the right thing."

My mother set down her fork, a bad sign. "Elements like Nancy Cunningham is what you're saying."

"I didn't say that. Nancy was a fine woman and her son Daniel was a great kid, but she was a single mother with nothing but a minimum wage job and a deadbeat brother who sucked up half her rent money in beer." With that, he gave me a glance, but I ignored the slur on Uncle Willie, as my father seldom had anything good to say about anyone we knew. Besides, I was convinced it was just another attempt to denigrate him in order to squelch my plans to become a professional adventurer.

"If we all lower our standards," he continued, "in order to keep the Nancy Cunninghams and others like her living here, we'll be the next to move out of East Rogers Park."

He went on about the neighborhood and standards, and when I carried away my empty plate and went to my room to

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ready myself for bed, I could hear them still arguing the subject. Their voices carried me to sleep and their words formed my dreams, so that when I woke the next morning I was thinking of Daniel and the empty apartment, and I determined to spend the night in Joey's room, if only to put the matter to rest.

I met him in St. Theresa's cafeteria at lunch. He looked tired, and he told me he had been up all night listening to the ghosts again. When I expressed my interest in staying overnight, he seemed both relieved and excited. "I have something to show you," he said, looking around us to make certain he wasn't overheard. "Something that explains the ghosts." But when I asked to see what it was, he shook his head. "Tonight," he said. "And only if you stay." So after school, we made the arrangements with our parents.

Joey's family ate dinner later than mine, and by seven thirty my stomach was growling at me. To make me even more uncomfortable, Joey's father came home in a foul mood, having been unable to secure a parking space for his El Dorado near the building at such a late hour. The car was only ten months old and had been broken into three times already. Of course I had heard my father say only a fool looking for trouble would bring a car like that into a neighborhood like ours, but I knew better than to pass on that information.

"Either you kids know who owns that Rambler out front?" he asked, and Joey and I shook our heads in silence. "Two flat tires, been sitting there, abandoned, for a month now. How many times do I have to call the city before they tow it away?"

The question was directed at Joey's mother. She told him to relax, but he said it made him nervous to park so far away because their insurance company had recently dropped him, and she countered that if he hadn't put in claims on the first three break-ins, the Cadillac would still have full coverage. That began an argument that lasted through dinner, and I was relieved when Joey and I finally rose from the table and went to his room.

We looked through his comic books for a while, and I told him of the feeling I had experienced the previous night while going through the comic Daniel had traded to me. I skirted around my sense of loss, afraid Joey might make fun, but he said he understood.

"You remember my Michael Jordan rookie-of-the-year card?" he asked, and I did. The

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way the Bulls were playing, it was a good bet they might clinch the NBA championship in the next year or two, making the card worth something. Joey had traded it to Daniel last December.

"Only because he wanted it so bad," he said. "It was my best card, primo, the only one in the neighborhood. I still miss it." He grew quiet and his head drooped down, and I knew he wasn't thinking just then of Michael Jordan.

"He's dead, you know," and he said it so quietly I barely heard it.

"Who?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"Daniel. It's his ghost I hear at night upstairs. It's his bedroom right above mine, and that's where the noises come from."

"That's crazy. We saw him move out that day with his mom."

"No. You have to understand about ghosts. You don't come back and haunt someplace just because you moved away. You have to be murdered, usually in the most horrible of ways. Daniel was murdered. I know who killed him, and I have the proof of it."

Joey knelt beside his bed and buried his arm between the mattress and box spring where he had lately been keeping his most secret possessions, his father having become expert at finding what he hid away, including his matches, cigarettes, and a *Playboy* that had not long ago cost him two weeks of freedom. He extracted something and offered it to me, saying, "I think it's what Daniel's spirit has come back for."

What he handed me was a scrap of paper approximately five inches square. It had been folded into quarters. The folds were nearly worn through, and the paper was thin and oily from having been carried in someone's back pocket for too long. Its edges were charred. On it was typed five lines of gibberish that read:

kurrkw sBUWK:A EIIN
RQI Oxwa ub
kwdr BS SUEWXRKT SIQB
KIIAW VIes agiqa rqi qRWE
AOIRA

I asked Joey what it meant, and he said he didn't know. "It's code. But I haven't been able to figure it out yet."

"Where did you get it?"

"From Daniel," he said.

He told me he had been looking out his window one morning last March, the first day of warm weather. He had seen Daniel walking alone out on the beach and had opened his window to call out to him.

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When Daniel didn't hear him, Joey became interested in spying on his movements. He had watched Daniel gather some stones together and place them in a pile on the sand.

"Like some sort of altar," he said. "And he was going to burn this piece of paper as a sacrifice or something."

Joey had run downstairs and reached Daniel just as the paper was beginning to burn. He had snatched it from the altar in time to save it from the flames.

"I asked him what it was, but he wouldn't tell me. All he said was that it belonged to his Uncle Willie, and that he had trusted Daniel with it. He said if his uncle found out he was trying to burn it, he would kill him. He made me promise not to tell, but in trade I made him let me keep it. You see? Kill him, his uncle said. And, kill him he did."

"But why was Daniel trying to burn it?" I asked.

Joey shrugged. "Once I get this code cracked, I'll know."

"You mean you've had this since March and you haven't been able to figure it out yet?"

"I forgot all about it until I started hearing the ghosts. Since then I've worked on it every night in my room. I even went to Fern. He knows about codes. He told me to look for a letter that's used a lot, that it's probably an *E* or an *A* or *S*. But I haven't got nowhere so far."

"Did you show it to Fern?" I asked. Fern was in the eighth grade, and if anyone could crack a code, he could. He wasn't very popular at school because he was withdrawn and skinny and his hair was long, so he spent all his time in his bedroom at the computer his parents had bought for him. He was an odd combination, what my father called a nerd with criminal tendencies, joking that if he had been born earlier in the century he would have made a fine accountant for Bugsy Siegel.

But Joey said he hadn't shown Fern the code because of the promise he had made to Daniel. I asked him why, then, he was showing it to me, but before he could answer we heard a knock on the bedroom door. Joey slipped the paper back under the mattress as his mother entered the room to unroll my sleeping bag and put us to bed.

We lay quiet for what seemed like a very long time but was probably no longer than half an hour. Then Joey rose and took me out into the hall to make certain his parents were in bed. At the other end of the apartment, we could hear their bedroom television playing low.

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We crept back into Joey's room where he took a flashlight from the table by his bed, lit it, and placed it under the bedsheets so its light could not be seen through the crack under the door. Its strange, soft glow didn't help to lift my mood as Joey talked more of ghosts, coming up with ideas of how Daniel met his death, the descriptions growing ever more vivid and grisly in detail. As the night went on, however, even Joey's wild imagination could not keep my eyes from closing, and soon I was asleep.

I woke with Joey's hand on my shoulder. He was on his knees beside me, his head tilted back, his face aimed at the ceiling. The batteries in the flashlight had weakened. The corners of the bedroom were dark. In the thin light that had shrunk to cover only us, I could barely see Joey's face, one finger placed over his lips to signal me to be quiet.

"They're here," he whispered.

I could hear them moving above our heads. At first I thought it was only one ghost, but then I counted a second, one whose steps fell more lightly and quickly than those of the first. The heavier footsteps stopped, and the lighter ones moved from directly above us to the far corner of the upstairs bedroom. I looked at Joey's face, at the luminous dial of the clock beside his bed. It showed one thirty. I looked back at the ceiling, as the heavier ghost was moving again, shuffling in the direction the lighter ghost had taken, and I heard a thud, what might have been a body, land softly above us. After that, all was quiet, and I realized in the silence just how tightly Joey's hand was gripping my shoulder.

Then the groaning began. It started softly, barely audible, then grew louder, and louder still, until it was no longer a groan but, as Joey had described on the beach, a scream, high-pitched, sharp, and lasting only a second. Then more silence until the groaning picked up again like someone in pain, the pain growing more excruciating until the poor soul cried out and was smothered into silence a moment later.

Joey and I sat close together, low on the floor, as far from the high ceiling as possible. The cracks and irregularities in the plaster seemed to take shapes above me, and more than once I imagined I saw a spirit's tortured face form before us, begging us to take some action and stop its agony. Yet neither of us moved. I thought I heard noises outside the window, then in the hallway on the other side of the

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closed bedroom door, and Joey had to assure me repeatedly that the ghosts never strayed from Daniel's room.

So I sat, staring at the ceiling until my neck was stiff, listening to the groans, screams, and footsteps for what seemed like forever until they stopped abruptly. Joey pointed at his clock. It was nearly four.

"They're gone," he whispered, climbing back into his bed. "They won't be back tonight."

We talked for a short time, but now it was me talking of ghosts. Soon I realized Joey was asleep. I lay in my sleeping bag, shivering, staring at the bedroom window, and watched the sky lighten until the sound of the waves breaking on the beach put me to sleep as well.

In class that morning Sister Bernadine woke me twice. Her stern warnings kept me alert until lunch when I found Joey sitting by himself in the cafeteria, his bleary eyes working on the code he had snatched from Daniel.

"It won't do no good," I told him. "I'm too tired to think, and you can't keep your eyes open. We have to take the code to Fern."

"But I promised Daniel."

"Some promise. You already broke it when you showed the code to me. Besides, you said it was from his uncle. It could have come from anywhere around the world. What if it's an Egyptian curse or something? It's best you know, seeing how you're stuck with it now. If it did kill Daniel, you might be next."

I didn't believe the slip of charred paper held an Egyptian curse any more than I really believed Daniel was dead and haunting the third floor of McKrell's old building, but if this code had belonged to Uncle Willie, there had to be an adventure behind it. And if I wasn't allowed along with him to search it out, I had to satisfy myself by knowing the adventure had at least come to me.

His real name was Winslowe. Fern was his hacker handle. He had adopted it exclusively because he considered himself a conservationist and said every gangster needs a nickname. His bedroom looked like an unkempt depository shared by a library and a Radio Shack, with magazines covering the bed and dresser, electrical wires crossing over themselves on the carpet.

"You wanna buy a butt?" Joey bought three. I passed, still wary after the nuns had caught me smoking a few weeks earlier. Fern purchased the cigarettes in cartons, using his older brother's I.D., and

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sold them individually for a quarter apiece. Though he claimed he spent his money on software, everyone knew he also played the numbers through some people he hung with in the neighborhood, the type my father referred to as "elements."

"This is gonna cost you," he said, taking his gum from between his teeth and placing it on the mouth of his Pepsi bottle. He lit his and Joey's butts, motioned me to crack the window. "Who wrote it?" he asked.

"It was Daniel's," Joey said, evading the question.

"Danny Cunningham? No kidding. I miss that kid."

Joey asked about price. Fern said he couldn't say until he saw the code. Reluctantly Joey took the sheet of paper from his pocket and spread it open on Fern's crowded desk.

"Doesn't look too tough," Fern said after examining it for a full minute. "You see that colon?" He pointed to the first line. "Whoever wrote this even went so far as to transpose his punctuation marks. This must be an apostrophe, making the *A* after it either a *D* or more probably an *S*. See that? We're off already."

I asked, "Why are some of the letters in capitals and some not?"

"Why?" He looked at the code again, put out his cigarette, put his gum back in his mouth. "Why?" We waited. His eyes narrowed. "Oh no you don't. No free advice. You get the answer when I crack the code. Come back tomorrow and bring ten bucks with you."

"Ten bucks?" The sum seemed astronomical.

"You happen to know the going rate for code busting? I'm giving you a break. And I have expenses. It's not easy being me."

Joey and I excused ourselves and debated his price in the hallway. Since we had no choice, most of the discussion centered on how we could possibly get our hands on ten dollars, a question still unanswered when we returned to Fern's room and agreed to his terms. We left him hunched over the code, the two of us wondering how we would ever make it through the eighth grade, it being so expensive.

Back in my room, I managed to come up with nearly three dollars in quarters, dimes, and nickels. I phoned Joey, who said he had scraped together two more. That left us five dollars short, but Joey seemed more worried about spending another night alone. I tried to arrange another sleepover. Though the idea did not bother

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my mother, my father said no, and he showed no sign of relenting.

"You don't see enough of that kid during the day, you've got to stay up all night with him? Look at your eyes, did you sleep at all last night? What kind of twenty-four-hour outfit are they running over there?"

My mother, as was her job, jumped to Joey's defense, but my father waved her off.

"I don't mind Joey," he said. "It's that father of his I can't stand, with his new Cadillac that he can't even afford to make payments on, washing it out front every Saturday afternoon, rubbing it in my face while his family eats hamburger."

My mother countered that she thought that was the type of neighborhood my father wanted. "If there were more Cadillacs on our block and fewer abandoned old Ramblers, maybe we'd get the streets cleaned more often."

"Fine, then. Remind me of that when the happy chrome Caddy gets repossessed and I'm laughing into my steak while my son goes to college and little Joey winds up like that punk Fern, hustling for a buck on the streets. You raise a child today, it's the spiritual values you have to instill in him. Values like . . . old values."

But he had stumbled, and a raised eyebrow from my mother made him quiet. My father seldom won an argument at our kitchen table, and I wondered why he even bothered.

It stormed that night. The thunder woke me. I found myself sitting up in bed thinking of Joey and feeling a terror I couldn't explain. Though I was able to fall back asleep, I woke the next morning early so I could walk the two blocks out of my way to meet Joey before school.

He looked bad, worse than he had the day before, with black circles around his eyes and a stare that registered nothing. His right hand seemed too weak to hold his schoolbooks. He rubbed his face with his left.

"They're coming for me, now," he said. "The ghosts. I saw him last night. I saw Daniel."

Normally, I would have told Joey he was crazy, but whatever he had experienced last night had shaken him so it was frightening me. I asked him what had happened, and he told me that when the noises had stopped upstairs early in the morning, he had left his bedroom, curious as to whether the ghosts walked away or simply vanished.

"I was in the kitchen," he said. "Everything was quiet ex-

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cept for the sound of the storm. Then I thought I heard a tapping, or a scratching at the back door. I couldn't move. I stood there looking at the door until there was lightning, and I saw his face. Daniel. His hair was wet from the rain and his face was streaked with dirt, and he was motioning with his hand, calling me out."

"What did you do?"

"I jumped and ran back to bed. Don't you get it? You were right. I never should have snatched that paper from the fire. Now Daniel is calling me from the grave. I'm the next to die. Then you. Then Fern."

I tried to talk sense to him, told him he had imagined the face in the window, but I couldn't penetrate his fear. I determined, school or no, that we had to see Fern immediately.

Fern could skip school when he wished, having stolen a blank form from the local HMO. He sold the copies, which he filled out, for three dollars each. We found him, as usual, in his bedroom, still in his pajamas. I was prepared for an argument, as Joey and I now needed two forms and the cracked code for the five dollars we had been able to scrounge together, but the strange look Fern gave us when we entered told us to sit down on his bed and be quiet.

"Tell me exactly, precisely, how you got hold of this," he ordered, pointing at each of us in turn. "No lying, no stalling. I want to know everything or you lose dibs on the code."

Joey seemed incapable of speech, so I told Fern the story of how Daniel had been burning the paper on the beach. I also told him about the ghosts that had been haunting Joey. Fern put his bare feet up on his desk and swiveled in his chair.

"Ghosts, huh?" He smiled, picked up a sheet of lined notebook paper, and handed it to me. On it, in pencil, he had printed five lines:

little daniel's room
two paces in
left and directly down
loose board shows two water spots

"What is it?" Joey asked me, not looking up from his lap.

"It's your decoded message," Fern told him. "It's also a treasure map, and it now belongs to us."

I asked Fern how he had deciphered the code. His face grew red. "Never mind," he said. "But if you keep your mouth shut about this, I just might tell you."

"You said treasure."

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"Read it yourself. 'Two paces in'? 'Loose board'? Think about it. You live in a house on Main Street, you bury your booty in your back yard. But you live in East Rogers Park, on the third floor, and your back yard is a public beach . . ."

"Treasure Uncle Willie brought back from one of his adventures!" I blurted out. I slapped Joey's arm. "Like the golden Béchar Chalice!"

Fern laughed out loud, the sound of it draining my excitement. "You guys kill me," he said. "You still believe that garbage Daniel's uncle used to dish out to you? Adventurer, my butt. The guy was a crook, and not a very good one. Everyone in the neighborhood knows that. The only things he ever brought back with him were taken from somebody's store window. Where do you think he went last year when he suddenly disappeared from his sister's place?"

"Africa?" I ventured weakly.

"Try Attica. Actually, I think it was Joliet, but I know he was locked up in Dwight back in '84. I was up half the night trying to remember what he was convicted of last year, and this morning I called my buddy Pete who runs the numbers. He reminded me it was Mr. Shulkin who brought the charges. Shulkin owns that shop on Sheridan."

Fern stood, stripped off his pajamas, and put on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. "We've got the map," he said. "We know where the treasure is. We just don't know what it is." He chuckled. "You two professional adventurers up to finding out?"

Mr. Shulkin's store was the smallest on the block. The sign outside said, "Stamps and Coins, Sell or Trade," and the dirty plate glass window facing the street was crowded with displays of both.

Fern did the talking. At first, Mr. Shulkin was wary. He was a huge man who moved in waddles and grunts, and he kept reminding us that truancy was against the law, but Fern talked fast. Soon they were laughing, and Mr. Shulkin led us over to a glass-topped counter where he showed us his coins.

"Royal Canadian Mint," he said. "I've got them from top of the line to bottom, this one being the most expensive I'm offering."

The set he was pointing to rested in a leather case about the size of a paperback book. The case was lined with silk and held a number of coins of different sizes, each encased in plastic. The small, neat price

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tag beside it read five hundred dollars.

Fern looked disappointed. "Five hundred is top of the line?"

"It is now, in my shop. But the set Willie snagged was special. You see, in 1965 Ottawa screwed up. They began minting a set with a slight flaw in the back of the silver dollar. It wasn't much, but any flaw boosts the value of any collectible, and the mistake was caught quick enough but not before a few sets were able to make their way into the market. I got my hands on one. Then Willie got his mitts on it.

"Dumb move. He was in here every afternoon about this time last year, just to chat, and I enjoyed his company. Then one day he asks me some stupid question that sends me to the back room for a few minutes. An hour later I notice my precious set is missing.

"Of course there was no proof it was him took the set, and it never was found, and I was insured and all. But I had to tell the cops, and knowing Willie's record, they put enough pressure on him that he cut a deal. Four years. I do miss that set of coins, but I think I miss old Willie's company more."

"How much?" Fern asked.

"Lots. Oh, the 'Sixty-fives? I priced them at ten thousand. Of course that's retail. If Willie did fence them, I doubt he got half that. But never mind that last part, as it's a dirty business of no interest to young minds like yours which should be in school, anyway."

"Did you hear that?" Fern shouted once we were back on the street. "Ten thousand bucks. We're rich. Ten grand rich."

"How do you figure?" I asked him. "We don't got the coins, just the code from where Uncle Willie hid them a year ago."

Fern could barely control himself. He grabbed me by both shoulders. "Think about it. Ghosts, you say? Look what's happened. Uncle Willie ripped off the coins and hid them in Daniel's room, two paces in, loose board. He made up this code and trusted Daniel with it while he did his time in Joliet. But Daniel, a quick learner, cracked the code, maybe thought if he could anyone could, so he decided to burn it.

"Now, a four year prison sentence is automatically cut down to two. That's how the system works. Drop six months for good behavior, six more to cover parole. Leaves one year, doesn't it? You see? Uncle Willie is back. Only Daniel screwed him up by losing the map, and his sister screwed him even further by moving

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out. So he has to come back at night, back to the old apartment to search for his coins. And, he can't find them because he doesn't have this."

He held up the paper Joey had taken from Daniel.

"How do you know he hasn't found them yet?" I asked.

"Because when he finds them, there will be no more ghosts upstairs looking for them. But, Joey, you say you heard them last night?"

Joey, more pale than ever, was staring at the tips of his sneakers. Fern repeated the question.

"They were back last night," he squeaked. "I saw Daniel's face in my window."

Fern turned back to me. "Ghosts still there, coins still there. Willie and Daniel come at night, which leaves us all afternoon today." He checked his watch. "All we need is a crowbar, and the treasure is ours."

We returned to Joey's building, walking along the empty beach, careful to stay off the streets after the coin dealer's warnings about truancy. When we reached the alley, Fern stopped and stared up at the three flights of steep, narrow back steps.

"You crawled out on that?" he asked, pointing at the third floor porch rail, its paint weathered, wood rotted. Joey, looking even sicker than before, only nodded. Fern shrugged, and we followed him upstairs, not worried about the noise we made, as Joey's mother worked days as a waitress and Mrs. Ravchick on the first floor was nearly deaf.

Fern wanted Joey to go through the window first, but Joey showed no sign of cooperating. Fern then explained to me that he had to stay behind Joey to keep him from running off, which left me to go first. I didn't see how I could argue with his logic, so, making sure my shoelaces were tied tight, and with Fern's hand fastened to my sleeve, I grabbed hold of the rail and swung my left leg over it.

The rail leaned with me as my body swayed out into space three stories above the alley. The wood creaked, and I waited to hear the snap that would separate the rail from the porch and send me down to the pavement with it. But it did not come, though I could see that the exposed four inch nails that had once secured the rail to the side of the building were bent and rusted, securing nothing. Fern told me not to look down, but I couldn't resist one glance, and I saw the tops of three garbage cans and a bicycle lying on its side, all so far away as to

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look two-dimensional. I grabbed hold of the kitchen window's frame, it, too, rotted loose, opened the window with my free hand, and slipped inside the Cunninghams' old apartment.

I stood for a moment and looked around the kitchen where Daniel and Joey and I had spent so many afternoons. The floor was dirty. Cabinet doors hung open, showing bare shelves lightened with a layer of dust. I exhaled, wiped my hands on my pants, then turned and helped Joey through the window. Fern handed the crowbar through to us and followed third. From there he led the way down the long, empty hall that led back to Daniel's old bedroom.

Though brighter than the windowless hall, the bedroom was not light enough to suit my mood. The air was stale, and every move we made or word we said echoed in the emptiness. Fern stood in the doorway and took the decoded message from his pocket. He took two long paces forward, turned left, stared down at his feet, squinted, evidently seeing nothing, moved farther to the left, slightly back, and stopped. He knelt and called us forward.

"This is it," he said, and he pointed to two water spots on the floorboard. I looked up to see Joey's reaction, but he was still lingering in the hall. "You're sure your mom isn't home?"

"I told you," Joey's voice was thin. "She gets home about three."

"Then let's enter the vault." Fern stood and grinned, took the crowbar from my hand, and wedged its edge between the two floorboards. "Loose board is right," he muttered as he leaned down on the bar, and all I heard next was that ghost groan from the other night as the board was pried up, culminating in a short shriek as the last of the nails came free and the board lifted.

Fern dropped the bar and fell to his knees. I stared over his shoulder at the shallow space he had uncovered. He reached down into it, felt around, and his hands came back out dirtied by old padding and dust. They held nothing.

"Maybe it was the wrong board," I whispered, but he didn't hear me. He was thinking, frowning at the board he had ripped out. Then he examined the one beside it and the one next to that. He ran his hands across their surfaces. He stood and walked slowly in a small circle.

"Nails are loose," he said, mostly to himself. "All of them." He walked in wider cir-

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cles while I got on my knees and saw that none of the thin nails was flush with the floor's surface. Each head protruded about a sixteenth of an inch.

"Except over here," Fern said, again to himself, now standing close to the bedroom window. He lit a cigarette, took a drag, used it as a pointer. "And here. So they started in the most likely spot, and they're working their way out in every direction. It must be slow work. They can't pound the nails back in because of the noise it would make, but they can't leave everything torn up in case the super comes in during the day, so they push the nails back. And now we know where they've been and where they haven't. Good for us. But why weren't the coins where they were supposed to be? Unless . . ."

Fern stood straight, brightened. "Unless he moved them."

"Who?"

"Daniel. Of course he moved them. Wouldn't you? Once Joey had that code, he knew the coins weren't safe, so he hid them under a different board, and he doesn't remember which one he hid them under. There aren't that many left. I can have this room done in under an hour."

He went to work immediately on the boards that hadn't been touched, ordered me to find something with which to hammer the nails back. I found an old putty knife in one of the kitchen drawers and followed behind him, pounding the nails flush, covering our tracks. Joey simply stood in the doorway, looking as though he needed to use the bathroom.

Two hours later we were done. Dust swirled in the shafts of light coming through the window. It settled on our faces, lips, and tongues. Fern sat in the corner with another cigarette as I hammered the last of the nails back into place.

If the coins were in that apartment, they weren't in Daniel's old bedroom.

"It doesn't make sense," Fern said, standing and pacing the room, rapping the crowbar against his thigh, his disappointment rapidly turning to anger. "Why would they come back night after night looking for something that isn't here?"

"Maybe," I offered, "when Daniel took them from under the board, he never put them back."

"And his Uncle Willie doesn't know that? No. You said you heard two ghosts, and Joey said he saw Daniel in his kitchen window last night. That means Daniel is here searching as well. So who has the coins?"

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"He said he was calling to him."

"What?"

"Joey said Daniel was calling him out."

I shouldn't have said it, and the few seconds it took Fern to digest it gave me more than enough time to regret opening my mouth. Fern, however, still consumed only with our search for a set of flawed coins, the sweat streaming down his face turning the dust into streaks of war paint, bellowed out Joey's name with a force that caused my spine to shrink.

But Joey was gone. The back door to the apartment was open. Fern ran down the stairs, and I scrambled behind him. When I reached the alley, he was out of sight, and by the time I caught up with him, he had already found Joey.

He had him pinned against the hood of the old abandoned Rambler. Joey held his hands over his face. Fern stood with his feet spread, slapping the end of the crowbar against his open palm. "You had them all the time," he was saying, leaning into Joey. "You had the code, and you had the coins, and you sat and watched me make a monkey out of myself all day today."

Joey lay on the car's hood, covering himself. Fern prodded him with the crowbar, and Joey flinched. Fern waited. I stood back on the sidewalk, afraid to approach. Finally Joey muttered something about not knowing what the code was all about.

"If I had cracked it," he said, "would I have showed it to you?"

The crowbar came down on the Rambler's front grille. "Don't give me that. I know you've got the coins. And Daniel knows you've got the coins. Why else would he be tapping on your window in the middle of the night? Why would he be looking for you?"

He slammed the crowbar against the hood, inches from Joey's kneecap. Joey curled up into himself. Fern raised the crowbar again, and I called out Joey's name, told him not to be stupid, to give Fern what he wanted. Finally, he reached into his back pocket and pulled something out of it, something Fern snatched up, examined, still careful to keep Joey trapped before him.

"What's this?" Fern asked, looking from Joey to the object in his hand and back to Joey.

"It was on the porch this morning," Joey said, his words now heaving from his chest between sobs. "It was why Daniel was there last night. He left it for me. A trade back."

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Fern tossed the object into the curb. It was the coins he was after, and anything else Joey offered was nothing but a stall. As he moved back into Joey, I ran out and picked up what he had thrown away.

I barely recognized it. The night's heavy rain had done enough damage to make it worthless. That was unfortunate because a few years later Michael Jordan would lead the Chicago Bulls into three consecutive NBA championships, and as Joey had said, his rookie-of-the-year card really could have been worth something.

Coins and stamps. Sell or trade. "Daniel had wanted it so bad," Joey had said. But what would he have been willing to trade for it? A set of shiny gold and silver coins obviously, just something he had found under the floor of his room when he cracked his uncle's code.

A fair trade, I thought. I still think so. But where were the coins? If Joey had them, he would certainly have given them to Fern by now, as even I was convinced he was ready to use that crowbar on my friend. He beat the hood of the car again, denting it badly, this kid who sold cigarettes out of his bedroom for a quarter apiece, who sat in his pajamas at his computer and shrank from his schoolmates, this kid I didn't recognize as the spittle flew from his mouth and he swung the metal bar in a wide arc, landing it on the Rambler's left headlight, shattering glass, piece by piece destroying the abandoned car with the two flat tires, the car Joey's father couldn't convince the city to tow away.

So he could park his own car in front of his building.

The car my father said he couldn't afford.

The El Dorado he had bought nearly a year ago, right about the time Joey had traded his NBA card for the set of coins, the coins that couldn't have been hidden in his bedroom any better than the *Playboy* or the cigarettes his father had become so expert at finding.

Poor Daniel, forced to accompany his uncle every night on a search for treasure he knew wasn't there. He thought Joey still had the coins, but he couldn't tell his uncle that. And Uncle Willie would have been even more furious if he had known the coins had been traded for a down payment on a Cadillac El Dorado.

My father was wrong about Fern. As I learned that afternoon, he could have been a fine employee of Bugsy Siegel, but he made a lousy accountant. He

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did know people who could hotwire a car, and who knew where to take it to have it stripped, but he had no clue how little money he would see in the deal.

It's a funny thing about money. It's not like trading cards or comic books, which increase in value as they age. It seems the more money is traded, the less of it one gets in return.

The Cadillac brought Fern only five hundred dollars. He was so disappointed in the sum it was difficult for me to drag him back to Shulkin's coin shop. Once there, though, he brightened, haggling Shulkin down to four hundred fifty for the Royal Canadian Mint set, enabling him to pocket the last fifty for software and his most pressing debts.

I was even more disappointed than Fern with the outcome of our search for Uncle Willie's treasure. As we entered the Cunninghams' old apartment for the last time and placed the coins under one of the boards closest to the window, I determined that if the life of a professional adventurer entailed the prying up of floorboards nightly, I wanted no part of it. I had no interest in seeing Uncle Willie again, especially when he tried to fence coins that were worth little enough to begin with. He would be more disappointed than any of us, but at least he would not be able to blame Daniel for that.

I did manage to convince Fern to explain how he deciphered Uncle Willie's code. Actually, he had been unable to crack it and had sent it out on his computer network to his fellow hackers, who solved it almost immediately to his embarrassment.

The key, he told me, which he had overlooked, was that the code had been typed. He showed me on his computer keyboard where one rested one's fingers along the second row of letters while typing. What Uncle Willie had done was to simply move each finger one key to the left, then type the words as one normally would without looking. That was why Fern had been unable to find his precious *A* to crack the code, because the *A* became the key immediately to its left, the shift lock, dropping the letter out entirely and accounting for the odd way the code shifted from capital to small letters and back.

"Brainless," he said. "If he had made it a little more complicated, I could have deciphered it with no sweat."

I didn't argue the point.

The only unanswered questions, then, rested with Joey.

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After all, Fern and I could hardly take him into our confidence after stealing his father's car. So when he told me on the beach that Saturday that the noises upstairs had finally quieted at two on the morning after our search, and that he had sneaked once more into Daniel's old bedroom and had seen the board near the window torn out and left lying free, I found myself scrambling for an explanation that would satisfy him.

"Because it just don't make sense," he said, throwing stones into the waves. "Fern already tore up that board once, and there was nothing there. And he said the only way the noises would stop was if they'd find the coins."

"Ghosts," I said.

"Ghosts?" he asked.

"Shuffling around, moving things. From one board to the other. It's the sort of things ghosts do, isn't it?"

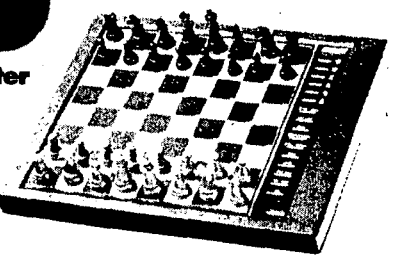
He thought about it, and finally concluded that was the most likely answer. He even suggested that maybe it was the ghosts who stole his father's uninsured El Dorado, though that, of course, was blamed on the neighborhood, its state lately consuming the thoughts of all our parents.

I didn't know why. There wasn't a street, an alley, a corner, or a crack in the sidewalk in East Rogers Park that didn't suit me just fine.

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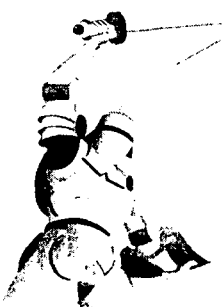
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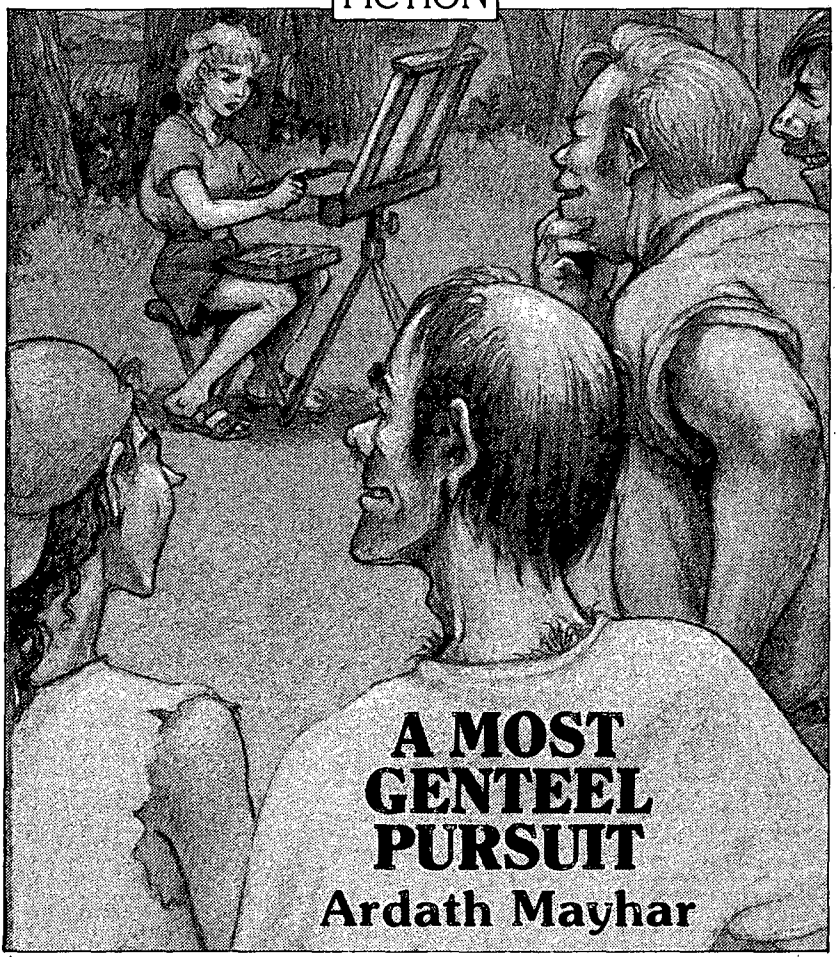
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A MOST GENTEEL PURSUIT

Ardath Mayhar

I never thought I could be talked into an extended leave of absence, not even after being beaten into hamburger by a bunch of street kids with bicycle chains. My work is what I am, and when I'm off, it leaves me restless and adrift. Once I got out of the hospital, I meant to go right back onto the streets, but two big obstacles stood in my way.

My grandmother was the bigger of the pair. She didn't like it

Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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when I was accepted into police training. She didn't dislike police, but she thought that was no job for her granddaughter. She was terrified every time I left the house and prayed hard while I was away at work. After the beating, she showed signs of going into cardiac arrest when I mentioned going back on duty.

The other obstacle was my doctor, who shook his head and looked grim every time I mentioned going back to work. "You don't think so now, but this has been a strain on you. It will take a while to build your strength again. You lost a lot of blood, almost as much tissue, and your body has to rebuild itself. You need to sit back and eat your grandmother's cooking for a while. Those scars need to heal."

Between them, they got me to agree to some time off. I almost went crazy sitting at the window, watching cars pass on the freeway and wishing I was out there to pull them over for speeding. Gramma realized, after a while, that I couldn't bear being lazy.

"Let's go up to the old place on the river," she said at last. "I'll call Cousin Cindy to get somebody to clean up the house and get the utilities connected. You always liked the farm and the woods and the river, and that'll give you something to do. Maybe you might take your paints . . . you used to be really good with watercolors. I wish . . ." but she didn't finish.

She was right, I had been good. Maybe I'd pick up the habit while I was off duty. It was a relaxing pastime, if nothing else.

I went shopping for supplies. A pocket watercolor kit, a pad of one hundred thirty pound watercolor paper, a folding stool, and I was ready for business. I still had my brushes, carefully cleaned and put away. By the time we were on our way, I was really getting excited about painting. I like doing birds and landscapes and tumbledown houses. God knows there are enough of all those in East Texas to keep me busy for years.

I realized, as it began to melt away with the miles, that I'd been pushing a dull weight of anger deeper and deeper inside me since the attack. It lessened, but I knew it was still there. The police psychologist told me it would stay with me for a long time. Maybe forever.

I knew all about that . . . after my divorce I'd been furious for five years, and even now it didn't do to think about it often.

Gramma and I moved back into her old home as if we'd never been gone. She and Gramps raised me, my sister, and my brother there after our parents were killed, and they did a bang-up job.

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We had what we needed, including lots of love and the kind of discipline you don't find much any more, firm but fair.

As usual, Gramma had known just what I needed. She'd told me, years before, that if I didn't divorce Reed I'd end up killing him (or he'd kill me). She was right.

After Gramps died, she went to Houston, though she hated the city, and kept house for me. Now that she'd put me back in the woods, I knew I'd been missing that for years.

I dived into the thick stands of forest like a fox and renewed my acquaintance with favorite places and familiar creatures. I began taking my painting stuff with me, for it all folded up and packed into a neat shape that could be carried on my shoulders. I started with quick sketches of birds. That wasn't enough, and soon I was considering landscapes.

There was a wide eddy where the river curved to the east. The woods came down to the banks on one side, amid cattails, waterweed, and button willows. The larger species of willows bent over the water, their reflected shapes warped by the ripples.

I wanted to paint it in watercolor, using that as a sketch from which to do a big oil later when I was home again. I'd take part of the home country back to Houston with me to cover my living room wall.

I did the preliminary sketches, got the composition just right, and started on my real work. Coming in after a shift on the streets, I would be able to gaze into that picture and let all the hostility drain out of me. For three days I sat on my stool on the sandy point above the eddy, getting every detail right before touching brush to water.

On the fourth day it rained. I sat at the window, impatient for it to clear. When it did, I was back there on my stool as soon as the light reached the angle I wanted. I washed in the values of forest and water and felt the old power run through my fingers into the brush.

A motor muttered around the bend, and a boat came into sight, wrinkling the water. It sputtered to a stop, and a voice yelled, "Whatcha doin'?"

The biggest of the four, the one who yelled, was a redfaced jerk who wouldn't have understood if I'd told him. I held my temper, however.

"I am painting the river. In watercolor." My tone was sharp, but it was the best I could do.

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The three younger men looked blank, but the questioner seemed to think I was making fun of him. "I asked you a civil question," he bellowed.

"I gave you an accurate answer," I said. "I want a picture of that bend to hang on my wall. To get it, I have to paint it. Simple, even for you, I'd think." It wasn't particularly diplomatic, but I was on my grandmother's land, in a place that had never seemed dangerous in all my thirty years.

I dipped my brush into the paint and laid in a long line to create the shadow beneath the farther bank. When I looked up, the four had come ashore and were moving toward me, lined up between me and the water.

"What in the world do you want?" I asked the redfaced man.

"Just a little roll in the hay," he said, showing big buck teeth. "This time it'll be mud, but you can't have everything. It's a waste, letting a pretty woman set out in the woods with nothin' better to do than smear paint around. We'll show you a real good time . . ."

I didn't wait for the rest. I rolled off the stool, pushed myself upright, and got ready. They looked surprised, but they kept moving toward me.

"Now, don't get feisty, honey. There's nothin' you kin do . . . nobody's closer than about five miles downriver. We won't hurt you, just have a good time, all together." The idiot really believed that. I could see it in his mud-colored eyes and the smirk on his face.

He lunged toward me and caught my shirt, tearing it off with one tug. Then he saw my scars.

While the bicycle chains had missed my face, they'd done a real job on my torso. Like I said, I looked like hamburger when my fellow officers found me.

"My lord!" said Redface. "What happened to you?"

The fury that had been buried was boiling to the surface. These four rednecks thought the finest thing a woman could hope for was to be gang-raped by their kind, and that assumption had triggered something deep inside. I had thought I could control it, but I found I couldn't.

I'd been taught hand-to-hand combat by the best. Two of the men went flying into the river under my first attack, without ever knowing what hit them. The other youngster took one look at me and dived in without help. But Redface was one of the old school, who thought a woman couldn't possibly handle him. He got redder than ever and opened his beefy arms to get me in a bear hug.

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I went for his eyes with my right hand while I tangled my left leg with his right and pushed him down into the mud. He gave a yell and put his hands over his fingernail-stabbed eyeballs. Tears leaked through his fingers, mixed with a bit of blood.

I rolled to my feet and caught him by the collar. Dragging him along the bank, aided by the slick mud, I dumped him into the boat, where his soaked companions were already waiting, being very quiet. They pulled him in and looked up at me with fear in their eyes.

With one foot I shoved the boat free of the bank. I grabbed up my torn shirt and tied it around me while they drifted out into the river. The anger was subsiding now, leaving a feeling of peace behind it.

I called after them, "You boys better get used to the idea that you can't just take what you want. It's not safe, with men or women, any more. Don't come to Houston, by the way." They were far enough now so I yelled, "Down there, I'm a cop!"

Three heads turned to look back. The fourth raised itself from the bottom of the boat and looked, too. His eyes were already clearing. Then somebody pulled the starter cord, and the motor sputtered, caught, and revved ruinously. They rocketed out of sight.

I put my painting gear back into order and sat down, whistling. The world was brighter than it had seemed in quite a while. That undercurrent of anger was no longer simmering inside me. I had needed a good, fair fight, not the ambush those street kids had set up.

Now I'd had it, and it felt great. Nobody had lasting damage, except to macho egos, though for a minute I'd had the impulse to blind that redneck.

I painted until the light failed. Then I went whistling home through the woods. Gramma met me with food ready on the table. "You look so well, dear. But how did you tear your shirt?" she asked. Without waiting for a reply, she went on, "I'm so glad you went back to painting. It's such a genteel pursuit."

I didn't quite laugh aloud, though I chuckled internally most of the evening. Then I slept like a baby, while the whippoorwills and the hoot owls and the crickets filled the night with music.

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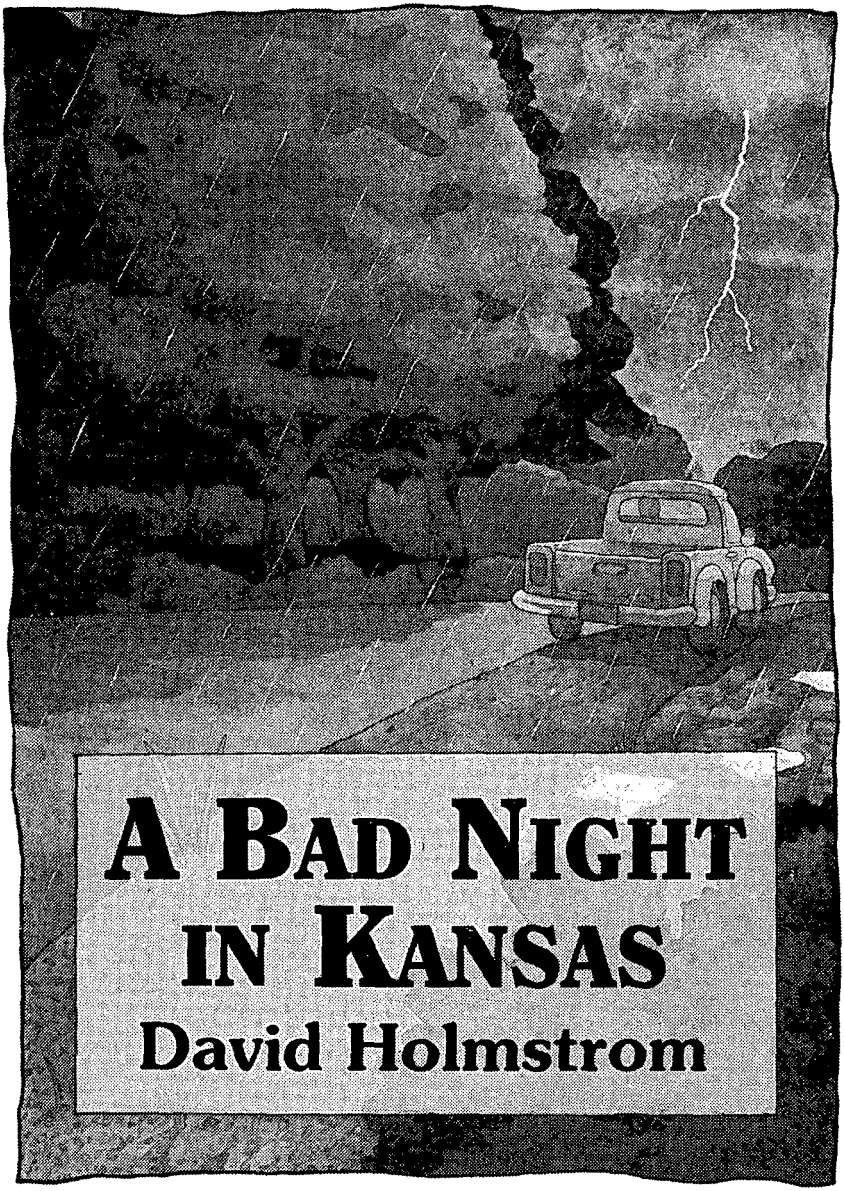
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FICTION



A Bad Night in Kansas

David Holmstrom

Illustration by Jim Adams

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The lightning that night seemed capable of splitting the earth with huge, unmerciful bolts of white. Everywhere in Plainfield and the trembling county the lights went out, flickered on, flickered down and finally off. Black rain poured down. Rivers went fat and dangerous, and by the side of Baker Road, just near a long bend in the road near tall elms, Eddie Pico felt his pickup go dead and roll to a muddy stop.

Fried, he thought. A burst of light had come seconds earlier at least forty feet from the side of the road. The lightning was packed with so much electricity that his hair had buzzed. A flash of ghostly light, then a thunderous explosion that momentarily deafened Eddie and popped something in his head. The headlights went off.

The old truck went dead. Fried, thought Eddie again, wiggling a finger in his right ear, all the wiring in the truck suddenly fused like steel in a hot furnace. Deaf and fried. He rubbed his chest and took several deep breaths, hoping his ears would pop free. His fingers tingled.

He reached into the glove compartment for the flashlight. So heavy was the rain spilling off the windows that even with the light on he couldn't see out. He turned off the light and sat in the befouled and drumming darkness, thinking of the risks of venturing forth. He knew he would be struck by lightning if he did; anybody else but me, he thought, and they'd have a free pass all the way to St. Louis. I'd get ten feet down the road and a big zipper would come hotflashing out of the night and turn me into vertical charcoal. Well, he would just sit and wait.

He knew he should have left the movie earlier when the thunder started shaking the building. Connie had stayed at home, reading a book, too tired, she said, to face even Robert Redford.

"Tired from what?" Eddie had asked, remembering how they used to go out dancing every Friday night somewhere in Kansas.

"Just tired," she answered. "Just tired from the week." As a farmer's wife she put in long hours just like he did. Lately she had been disheartened, troubled by farmers' not doing well and losing their farms, and even though she and Eddie were doing better than most, she worried too much.

"Well, okay," he said. "I wish you'd come. But I understand, I guess." She probably didn't want to put the book down, thought Eddie. She was always telling him he absolutely had to read this or that book because he wouldn't be able to put it down. Through her he had grown to like mysteries.

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She kissed his hand and smiled. He could never deny he loved her, no matter what comes in a farmer's life.

So Eddie went alone, driving eight miles to town while black clouds wrestled for first-strike positions overhead. At the movie he sat next to Earl Monroe, who had a cousin in Hollywood. "Bit parts," said Earl. "One line and a concerned look." He laughed.

Earl's wife Lou, in jeans and a yellow blouse, asked where Connie was, and Eddie said sourly, "She's reading a book."

"I go in spurts," said Lou. "I'll read ten books, then stop and go to ten movies." She laughed as the first rumble of thunder broke through the theater walls.

"I don't read much no more," said Earl, winking at Eddie. "I like stories, but not books." The house lights dimmed.

Lou dug an elbow in Earl. "You old pot of coffee," she said and kissed his ear.

Another splat of thunder shook the theater. Earl leaned toward Eddie and said, "High ground. Sit back and enjoy the movie knowing we live on high ground. She's gonna be real bad."

Seated in the truck now, Eddie kept rubbing his hands together, the odd, fuzzy tingle not an unpleasant sensation but worrisome because it seemed to be moving up his arms. Lord, he thought, listen to it come down. Inside the cab the sound of heavy rain striking the metal was amplified until Eddie thought dents might start appearing.

He turned the ignition key. Not even a murmur. Man, he thought, it's a good thing my forty-five acres of corn are in.

For comfort he turned on the yellow flashlight and laid it on the seat, the circle of light falling on the chromium door handle on the passenger side. Points of light reflected back at him. Brutish gusts of wind swirled around the truck, nudging it slightly back and forth so that the old rabbit's foot dangling from a chain around the rear view mirror swung slightly left and right.

He was a good half mile from Anderson Creek and a mile and a half from home. He knew the creek could flood in this kind of downpour, but the rain would have to fall through the night to swell the tributary until the waters spread far west, gobbled up two houses, and reached the road. Because of flood control efforts, the creek hadn't leapt its banks in fifty years.

Eddie supposed he was safe unless lightning struck. It's a waiting game, he thought. What I need is a good book. He rubbed his hands and then rolled up his right sleeve to look at his sun-browned

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arm. He clenched and unclenched his fist. The tingling was just past his wrist. To alter the tight feeling in his chest, he breathed in hard three times and exhaled. He guessed that the lightning had struck much closer than he suspected; the electrical supercharge in the air had probably jolted his heart and sent his blood surging through his veins.

Years ago he had read a newspaper account of a lifeguard struck by lightning near a lake. He thought it was strange that a lifeguard couldn't guard his own life. "It hit me and I can remember thinking, this must be what it feels like to be in the electric chair," said the lifeguard, who lost most of his hair and had to have all his fillings replaced.

It was in the middle of thinking about Connie—strangely wondering what page she was on—that the truck was hit by lightning. The white bolt, starting a mile above the truck, slashed down and hit hard with an earsplitting explosion that seemed to lift the truck in the air and drop it. There was a concussion of air, a powerful wallop at the back of Eddie's head running down his spine to his toes.

He slumped forward against the steering wheel, his body motionless but heated, his mouth open while he struggled to cry out in pain. Then he blacked out. The flashlight was knocked to the floor, sending reflected light up into the cab. He was unable to move or yell, yet his body felt a million needles while the twirling lights in his eyes were colors from some other rainbow, some other world. Short gasps of breath kept him alive. The ears sizzled, the toes hummed, the heart sought to get out of his chest. Seconds later he was back, semiconscious, head spinning, eyes heavy and dull, desperately trying to raise his head. Connie, he thought, oh dear Connie.

When the passenger door opened, and wind and rain billowed into the cab, Eddie managed to turn his head a little to the right. Someone was getting in slowly, someone big and awkward making noises, metal noises, banging and grunting. Light from the flashlight glinted off the metal. In the haze and pain, Eddie imagined that whoever it was was carrying a metal object like a tub or a large container, and was shoving it into the cab first and then would climb in after it.

Eddie tried to move his hands to help but couldn't get them to obey his mind. He could only stare and slouch in a numbed funk, hands sizzling uselessly in his lap as he tried to establish reason

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and control his body again. He heard the door shut. Next to him, in the gray light, he could make out a sharp-edged shape, a bulky frame with a pointed head and the sound of thin metal crumpling and bending: There was a cold metallic smell in the air.

"This is terrible," said a tinny, high-pitched voice. "It's bad enough in moist air, but this rain, damn!"

Eddie tried to speak. What tumbled from his throat was a pathetic gurgle. As his vision came into focus, Eddie suddenly saw who it was sitting next to him, but he was not able to believe that who it was made any earthly sense. Seated there, dripping and silvery, was the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz.*

"And you," said the Tin Man, "are only half dead. My, things appear to have gotten quite out of control. I was hoping for so much, and now . . ." His voice trailed off. "Maybe I was too soon."

"You . . ." Eddie said, struggling to form words. "You . . ."

The Tin Man put a cold, wet hand at the back of Eddie's neck and gently shook his head. "Come, come," he said. "Give us full sentences. You're the one with the brain."

"I . . ." stammered Eddie. "I . . ."

"The explanation," said the Tin Man, leaning toward him, "is that stories never end. The best stories live on and on, and I am the star in one of the best stories ever." He snapped his fingers, and the sound was like two spoons clacking together. "And so, here I am, the story continued," he said triumphantly. "And you get to be in it."

No, no, no, thought Eddie, this can't be; no, no, no, I have been struck by lightning and seriously injured. Oh God, I am hallucinating, I am injured. I am . . . what?

"Frankly," said the Tin Man, "when I saw that you were about to get whacked by lightning and probably wouldn't survive, I thought why not a heart transplant, you to me? Under the circumstances it seems like an interesting way to continue the story, as long as you . . . well, you know, as long as you're a marked man."

Multiple strokes of lightning flashed outside the truck. The Tin Man had tin layered lips, aluminum-colored eyes, a rounded tin nose, hands with joints, and a tin chest that was round, dented, and marked with scrapes. Suddenly animated by fear, Eddie found his voice and managed to raise his head. "I am . . . not . . . part of your . . . story," he said.

The Tin Man laughed and said, "You are. Touch me, and if you agree I am here in Kansas, then we are here together in this story."

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He held out his hand, palm down. "Go ahead, touch me. Dorothy didn't believe me either."

Eddie looked down at the hand offered, a battered but operable five fingered construction of rounded tin, now wet and shiny in the dim light. This is impossible, Eddie thought. Lightning has scrambled my brain. What is is what is not. How fast can a tin man run? he thought. He groped for the door handle but didn't have the strength to pull it.

"Anything you do is part of the story," said the Tin Man, "even thinking, even telling more stories." He grinned. "I suggest a different twist. Instead of not believing I am here, believe I am here. Believe this is happening."

Eddie stared at the apparition next to him, hoping the strange terror he felt was only ballooning inside a dream that could be popped by simply waking up.

"No," Eddie gasped. "I'm a farmer. I plant and I harvest corn. I'm going home now."

"See," said the Tin Man. "So am I, going home of sorts. Our two stories are becoming one story."

"No, no," Eddie shook his head and tried to bang his feet against the floor. "Not a story. Lightning hit me."

"I know what this is," said the Tin Man with an edge in his voice. "You don't. I know a story when you're in it."

"I'm going home soon," said Eddie weakly. "You can't come."

"Are you that ill?" asked the Tin Man. He placed a hand on Eddie's forehead. "No fever," he said. Then he placed a knuckle aside Eddie's chin, turned his head, and peered into his eyes with the flashlight. "Clear, if a little glassy," he said. "Frankly, it's probably your heart."

Eddie tried for the door handle again. "Like this," said the Tin Man, reaching across and opening the door. Wind caught it and violently pulled it open as a wall of cold rain slanted into the cab. Eddie drew in his breath. This is as good as any way to wake from a dream, he thought, and half jumped and fell out the door. He struck the pavement on elbow and hip, the heavy rainfall soaking him instantly. Clattering behind him was the Tin Man holding the flashlight. "Must you?" he shouted, helping Eddie to his feet. "You're not up to this, and rain is not my favorite liquid."

Lightning flashed in the distance. For an instant the road, the truck, and the Tin Man were illuminated by a silver glow. Rain continued to drench everything.

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"Go away!" yelled Eddie to the Tin Man as he staggered to keep his balance and pull away from him.

"How far away is your house?" shouted the Tin Man.

"Wrong story," Eddie shouted back at him.

Another flash of lightning struck to the south. Seconds later a thunderous boom hit, and Eddie covered his ears. He took two steps away and then broke into a loose run. "Anything you do is part of the story," yelled the Tin Man. "Run hard."

The cold rain was bracing to Eddie. He felt less weak, but he wasn't sure he could run with steady feet in the darkness even though he knew the turns in the road all the way home. Over his shoulder he saw the Tin Man—with flashlight jiggling—awkwardly running after him. "Get your heart pumping!" shouted the Tin Man.

What could have happened to me? Eddie thought. Some kind of sudden recircuitry of my brain, like switching a track for an oncoming train? Maybe I am crazed, or maybe I slipped into some kind of netherworld where characters from books wait for bad nights in Kansas to emerge and break all the known rules. Is he real? I felt the metal on the back of my neck. He opened the truck door, I didn't; and there he is, running behind me like an animated trashcan, holding my flashlight, wanting my heart.

Eddie ran for his life, his legs gaining strength with each splash of his feet. The Tin Man stumbled and puffed as he tried to stay near, but managed only an ungainly stride that hardly worked. In the first fifty yards he fell three times, each fall a noisy, thumping collapse and scraping as he sprawled and then struggled to his feet, dripping and swearing.

Eddie increased the distance between the two of them quickly and looked back at the tiny light from the flashlight. A tin man can't run very fast, he concluded, and this is no yellow brick road. Maybe he'll disappear as quickly as he appeared. Here's a story that's going to end with me getting away.

Minutes later the intensity of the rain decreased. Eddie was half a mile ahead of the Tin Man, his elbow and hip aching, but no longer were his hands or body tingling and buzzing. His heart was beating wildly. In a little over a mile he would be sloshing up the road off the highway toward his farmhouse, wondering what to do next, wondering how to tell Connie that the Tin Man was chasing him through the storm.

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He glanced back over his shoulder down the slope of the road. Deep into the thin rain he could see the tiny dot of yellow light from the flashlight perhaps a half a mile away. Far to the west lightning cut the darkness; the plains lit up briefly in a grey light, then blackened again. A second later another bolt, this one arcing meanly out of the overhead sky, reached down with fury and found the Tin Man.

In the distance Eddie saw the crooked white line hit the top of his head and disintegrate the tin shape in a shower of blue sparks that exploded, sputtered in hot, flying pieces, and disappeared. The Tin Man was blown apart. A flame burned on the pavement briefly and went out. In between the stroke of lightning and the boom of thunder, Eddie heard the pop, a tinny crunch as if someone had stepped on a tin can or lifted off a bottle cap. Then the thunder cracked and rolled as Eddie covered his ears. The sound shook his stomach and spread quickly over the open land and vanished. In seconds the rain had stopped.

Eddie stood with his mouth open while he sought to make sense out of what he had just experienced and seen. Am I next? He turned quickly and broke into a run. I am not part of a story, he insisted, I am nonfiction, a farmer with a wife and debts, a frugal mortal with lineage and a good heart. I did what I did. The Tin Man got into my truck and said he wanted my heart. I got out, quick. I ran, I'm still running.

Close to exhaustion, he ran up the road to his two story white farmhouse, a candle glowing in the front window. The power is out, he thought. Connie is worried; she is waiting for the sound of the truck coming up the road.

He staggered through the kitchen door into a house dotted with candles. "Connie?" he called as he kicked off his soaked shoes and slipped out of his socks. "Connie?" He moved through the kitchen quickly, grabbing a dish towel to wipe the rain from his face. What a story I have to tell her, he thought, what an unbelievable story.

In the living room a fire was crackling in the fireplace. "Oh, Eddie, I was so worried," exclaimed Connie, rising from the couch in her purple bathrobe, putting her book aside. "You're soaked. What happened? You look like you've seen a ghost."

He stood in front of the fireplace, breathing hard, holding his chest, staring at the floor. She wiped his face and peered into his blue eyes. "Eddie, what happened? Where's the truck?" He took off his soggy jacket and dropped it on the brick hearth, then shed

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his pants and shirt. She brought him his white bathrobe and slippers.

"Eddie, tell me," she urged him and rubbed his shivering back. He looked at her intently, wondering how to tell her or anyone else what had happened, where to begin, what to include, how to take the bones of it and add the fear, the danger, the smells, the overwhelming disbelief of seeing and touching and talking with the Tin Man. The very Tin Man of Oz.

"Connie, remember *The Wizard of Oz*? The Tin Man?"

"Yes. Why?"

He took a deep breath. "Honey, stick with me on this." He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her backwards into a wing-backed chair. "You better sit down. I've got a helluva story to tell you."

Seated in the chair, Connie cocked her head and frowned. "Eddie, what's going on?"

"I leave the movie," said Eddie. "It's raining bullets, lightning flashing everywhere, thunder shaking the whole earth. I'm about three miles outside of town and for some dumb reason I'm thinking of *The Wizard of Oz*. Don't ask me why. It's been years since I read the story. But I'm humming the song from the movie, 'Follow the yellow brick road, follow the yellow brick road . . .'

"All of a sudden lightning hits the truck, *kabloom!* For a minute I can't breathe, I can't see. My whole body is on fire. I black out, and the truck goes off the road, flips completely over, and lands upright. My seat belt holds me in, but I'm hanging sideways in the truck, my head knocked silly. The next thing I know is that I'm waking up and this guy, this hulking guy, is going through my pockets. I'm pretty groggy. The rain is coming in the open door, and I can't move my hands, but I can see he's got a big knife in his mouth and he's holding my flashlight in one hand. He's mumbling to himself, and when he puts the light against the dashboard, I get my first look at him. Lightning flashes. It's the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz*. It really is him, all shiny and wet and banging his tin legs and arms against everything. I can't believe it. First, I think it's a dream, then he sees I'm awake and he apologizes for the inconvenience. You know the story, he says. Sorry, he says, I need your heart."

"Eddie, honey . . ."

"Connie, in fifteen years of marriage have I ever lied this big to you? Ever?"

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"I sense that now is not the time to . . ."

"Please don't interrupt me. Then the Tin Man takes the knife out of his mouth. I say to myself, Eddie, dream or not, defend yourself. So it's flesh against tin. I hold his wrist with one hand and bang his head and shoulders with the other. I dent him, big dents all over his shoulders, and he's trying to sink the knife into my chest.

"Finally I knock the knife loose, and it falls somewhere in the truck. He tells me I should be dead, the lightning should have killed me. He tells me I'm ruining the story, and that I should have gone peacefully, but whatever I do is part of our story. Not my story, I say. I push him out of the truck. I hear him fall outside with a crash. I finally get the seat belt unhooked, grab the flashlight, and jump out of the truck into the wind and rain.

"He takes a swing at me. I duck and push him back. He tries to kick me. I grab his foot, lift up, and put him on his back. He slides across the road like a tub. The rain is falling in buckets, and he's yelling at me, 'The story must go on, the story must go on.'

"Then I realize that Mr. Tin Man is an invitation waiting to be hit by lightning because it's popping all around us. He's made of metal and has a pointed head. He's a heartless lightning rod. I drop the flashlight and break into a run, my legs still tingling a little, but I'm running for my life because I don't want to be near him when he gets hit by a few thousand volts.

"I'm running as hard as I can, and I hear him behind me, banging and clanging and swearing as he tries to keep up with me. But he can't. He falls way behind. I run and run. Finally, when I get to the up-slope near the three elm trees, the rain has lessened a little. I stop and look back down the road about a mile. I can see the flashlight jiggling along, and then, *wham,* he gets hit by the biggest lightning bolt I've ever seen. An enormous blast slams down from the heavens and turns him into a shower of blue sparks. *Wham!* the sparks fly up. He's there and then he isn't. Just like that, blue sparks and he's gone."

Eddie paused, taking in a deep breath. "The end of my story, the end of his."

Connie stared at him, then got up out of the chair and headed for the kitchen. "I'll put some coffee on, honey, and you just sit down and relax."

"Connie," he said angrily, "this happened, this happened the way I told you. I am not crazy. The Tin Man actually appeared

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and actually tried to get my heart. I know it sounds unbelievable, but it really happened."

In the kitchen Connie put the coffeepot on the stove and then quietly pushed the buttons on the phone for Dr. Maynard. He would tell her what to do until he could get there and find out what had happened to Eddie. After two rings he answered.

Eddie stood in front of the fireplace, mumbling to himself and shivering. When the front doorbell rang, he jumped, his eyes suddenly big. "Connie!" he yelled. "Someone is at the door!"

Connie put her hand over the phone and said. "You get it, will you, please? I'll be there in a second or two."

It's probably a passing motorist, thought Eddie. Someone from out of state who got lost in the storm and saw the candle in the window. They're looking for directions. Or maybe it was old man Nelson from the farm two miles to the south, checking to see if they made it through the worst part of the storm. He chuckled. Or maybe it's Dorothy and Toto.

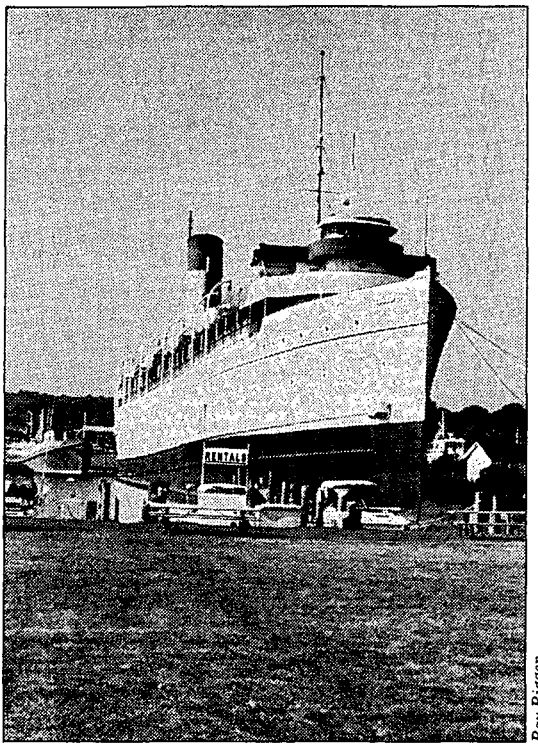
Eddie took a candle from the mantel and walked barefoot down the carpeted hall, his heart almost back to normal and his backside nicely warmed by the fire. As he unlatched the oak door and started to swing it open, he caught a slight whiff of a metallic smell. "No!" Instantly he tried to slam the door shut, but the Tin Man stuck his battered foot inside, then his arm, and forced the door open. "And you thought the story was over," he said, standing there with the knife, his body covered with black streaks. "Never," he whispered.

Eddie fell back against the wall, clutching his heart, gasping for breath, unable to speak.

From the kitchen Connie hung up the phone softly and called out, "Eddie, I'm making plenty of coffee for anyone."

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Ray Riggen

"Cruising down the river, on a Sunday afternoon. . . ." We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

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FICTION

Man in a Box

Jas. R. Petrin



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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"She's back, chief," Claudia Webb whispered hoarsely over the phone from the front office. "And mad? Heck, she's tearing your *Field and Stream* magazines to pieces with her fingernails. She's grinding her teeth like she's going to jump up and bite through your door. Don't ask me to lie. She might go for me. Stuff *Field and Streams* down my throat, what's left of them."

Chief Robideau said, "You don't mean . . . "

"That's right. Your old friend. Elsie Penrose . . . "

The chief groaned.

". . . and is she hot. You could fry an egg on her. You could bake potatoes under her arms . . . "

"Send her in," the chief said weakly.

" . . . boil a kettle on her, chief."

"Send her in, but keep your ears open."

"In case she tries something?"

"No, in case *I* try something. Like throw myself clean out the window."

Elsie Penrose had been a nuisance for years after her husband had run out on her, constantly haranguing Robideau about her missing hubby, who did not send her the support payments that had been duly awarded to her. All he sent was an occasional postcard. Chief Robideau had tried to follow up a few times, but as a tracking device, the postcards never seemed to pan out. With old Murray seeming to do more globe-trotting than Carmen Sandiego, pinning him down required an international effort, and what could Robideau do in a smalltown office? He wasn't Interpol. He wasn't the mounted police. And he sure couldn't send the big boys haring off after a will-o'-the-wisp on the strength of a lousy postcard.

Then came a hiatus. Suddenly Mrs. Penrose wasn't a nuisance any more. The police station visits dried up, and the phone calls petered out. In fact, Robideau hadn't heard a word from the woman in over a year, and he had been starting to hope that her troubles—and therefore *his* troubles—were finally over.

And now this.

Bracing himself to face the implacable woman again, his stomach lining settling into that old familiar burn, he opened his desk only to discover that his extra large bottle of Rolaids was empty. Nothing in it; just dust.

Chief Robideau asked himself, not for the first time, if it was worth it being chief of po-

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lice in a town like End of Main. You didn't feel like a policeman most of the time, you felt more like a fourth grade schoolteacher stepping in to sort out spitball competitions. It got you down.

He consoled himself with a glum sigh; it was a thankless job, but the pay was lousy.

Mrs. Penrose stormed in, and Claudia was right. You could almost see the heat waves quivering over her, as if she were a barbecue cranked up to full broil and ready for meltdown.

"This time you *got* to do something," she shrilled. She came at him like a bird, all feathers and beak. "You got to *help* me this time, Robdough—"

"Robideau," he corrected her gently, but she brushed that aside.

"Wait'll you hear the stunt that husband of mine's gone and pulled on me now! It's the limit! The absolute limit! I don't have to endure it, and I won't. I pay your salary, mister, and you're going to give me satisfaction, or I'm going to stop paying taxes and let you starve. Are you listening to me for a change?"

"What is it this time, Mrs. Penrose?" Resignedly wondering what taxes the penurious Mrs. Penrose could conceivably be referring to, Robideau let his reclining chair sag slowly backwards until he was nearly face up, his arms dangling. He began counting the holes in the ceiling tiles. "Let me guess. You got a postcard out of the blue from your husband again, and he's run off to another corner of the world. Am I right?" Oh, the places Murray Penrose had seen; you had to envy the man. "Let me guess. Is he in Mozambique? Or Islamabad? In Dubuque, Iowa? Or Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan?"

"None of the above, Mr. Sarcastic. He's right here! Almost on top of you! *Right under your nose!*"

Robideau blinked. He tilted forward with a clunk. This was something. If Murray truly was here—and if the chief moved fast enough—maybe he could put an end to this recurring unpleasantness once and for all.

"You say he's here?" The chief eyed his coat. "Where exactly?"

"He was exactly at the circus, not an hour and a half ago."

The circus. Mrs. Penrose could only be referring to the traveling fair that had recently arrived to highlight the Icelandic Festival—Islendingadagurinn—now in full swing out the road north of Gimli. Rides and sideshows, the whole ball of wax.

"Was he driving? Walking? Headed this way? What?"

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"He weren't headed nowheres."

"You mean he was sitting down?"

"I mean he was lying down."

"You mean sleeping?"

"No, I mean *dead!* D-E-A-D! He's really done it this time. Gone and gotten himself killed, and *now* how am I gonna get all what's coming to me?"

At that Mrs. Penrose threw her little sparrow head back and let out a penetrating squawk.

Chief Robideau could only stand there. This was too much to take on one plate. Murray Penrose had been missing for—what was it?—going on three years? And now he was back? At the fair? *Dead?*

Claudia Webb shoved her head in the door, and took a scared look around. " 'Scuse me. Only checking. I heard something, chief, and thought I better take a quick look and see—you know—about what you said." She glanced worriedly at the window, then pulled the door shut again.

"All right, Mrs. Penrose, let's take this from the top." Robideau steered the woman gently to a chair. He handed her the box of tissues from his desk and gave her a reassuring pat on the arm. "Tell me about it."

"Well, it all started this morning," she sobbed, dabbing at her eyes. "What happened, see, Mrs. Pebbleridge phoned. She asked me did I want to go out to the Gimli Islen . . . Islen . . . , whatever the stupid thing it is. I didn't want to go, but she just about made me. She came over, practically knocked down my door, and dragged me, telling me all this malarky about how it'd do me good and bring me out of myself. 'I don't *want* out of myself,' I told her; 'It's cosy and warm in here,' I told her." Mrs. Penrose honked pitifully into a tissue which she then wadded up and dropped on the floor. "But I went, and I actually *was* starting to feel better—until we made a wrong turn and blundered into that dumb Cave."

"Cave?"

"You heard me. The Cave of Incredible Horrors. 'Special Fearful Attractions from the Fourfold Corners of the Earth! Guaranteed to Boggle your Brain!' " She sniffed. "It boggled my brain, all right. Cost us three dollars each."

"Go on."

"Well, we went inside, and I'm telling you, it was dark as a root cellar in there. Even *smelt* like a root cellar. They got this passage, you go down it, and behind little windows there's exhibits. First we seen the Origi-

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nal Wolfman—*he* wasn't too boggling, stiff as a clothes-horse, with the fur hanging on him like a rug. Then we seen Frankenstein. There he was with his big fat shoes—don't dance with *him* without your steel-toed boots on. And right around the corner is where . . . where . . . " She burst into tears again. "How was I to know who it was? The sign didn't say 'Elsie Penrose's Husband.' No. It said 'Amazing Manitoba Muskeg Man—Mummified Mammoth Hunter Mired in Mud!' "

" 'Mired in . . . ' "

"Mud! Mud! Clean out your ears, for pity's sake! He was laid out in . . . in this box just like a funeral casket, except refrigerated, with the top of it made into a window-lid. At first I couldn't squeeze past Mrs. Pebbleridge, she's got a tailsection on her like a International Harvester. She says, 'Don't look, Elsie, it'll make your hair curl.' Well, when she said that, I had to climb right over her for sure, didn't I, because nothing makes my hair curl, not even an Easy-Clip forty dollar perm'nent soaked into my head for half a day."

Mrs. Penrose's tears welled up again, though whether it was because of her husband or her hair, the chief couldn't tell; she wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"I had to be willful. I shouldn't have looked. *It was my own Murray lying there in that box!*"

The chief came at her gently. "Mrs. Penrose, it couldn't be . . . "

"You saying I don't know my own husband?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean of course you do. Only you did say the light was bad, and . . . "

Her mood swings were astonishing. Now her eyes flashed like tiny danger flares. "Listen! I'd know that booze-guzzling tomcat anywheres! In a power-electrical blackout, I'd know him! In a total eclipse of the world!"

Robideau backed off. "Well then, maybe if you describe to me just how he looked . . . "

She was snuffling now.

"Like he always looked after a toot. Puffballs under his eyes and hollows in his cheeks. And fishbelly white from lying dead in that cave all this time." She tightened her fists as if she regretted she couldn't use them on him. "He had that same smirk on his mummified lips, that same awful smirk. If you think I'm lying, ask Mrs. Pebbleridge. She seen him, too. She seen him first."

"I believe you, Mrs. Penrose." He added earnestly, "I believe you saw *some*thing."

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"Darn right I did."

He shuffled some papers. "Yes. So—uh—what would you like me to do?"

Her eyes bugged out.

"What? You can sit there and ask me that? Why, get up off your middle-aged spread, that's what. Pull a SWAT team together and swarm in there and take that fair apart. Catch the killers. Slap a lock on them—a padlock, a headlock, I don't care what kind of a lock. Arrest them!"

"But who *are* his murderers?"

"The people who own that circus, who else? I want them persecuted!"

"You mean prosecuted."

"I mean hung from the top spoke of their Ferris wheel!"

"Mrs. Penrose, I'll look into it. But you can't allege murder without proof . . . "

"Murray's all the proof you need. There he is, dead in a box. Use *him* for proof. He'll be good for something, finally." Mrs. Penrose stood up and jerked her sweater about her. "Somebody's got to pay for killing the sole supporter of a destitute woman."

Robideau frowned.

"Are you saying Murray had finally started making those support payments, Mrs. Penrose?"

She stopped. Clamped her mouth shut. Opened it again.

"What's that got to do with the price of eggs? You trying to say I'm only here because of money?"

"I didn't mean that exactly—"

"Then don't confuse things. Do your job. And don't take your usual sweet time about it, neither. These are circus people. Gypsies. They could fold their tents, and Murray could vanish all over again. Start sending me postcards again." She rolled her eyes. "I can just imagine it this time—color shots of graveyards and tombs of the world!"

The chief didn't move. Mrs. Penrose looked as though she wanted a stick to poke him with. "Well?" she snapped.

"I'll check it out, Mrs. Penrose, but . . . "

He couldn't help his face. He knew it told her clearly that he wasn't entirely convinced. She hesitated, then suddenly swept up her purse, dropped it in her lap, and popped it open.

"You think I'm imagining things, don't you? You think there's no way Murray could be at that fair? All right, Mister Doubting Thomas, what about *this!*"

She slapped a news clipping down on his desk. It was dog-eared and yellow. He saw that

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it had been snipped from an issue of the Los Angeles *Times* and had been dated with pencil in its margin: April 14, 1977. The header read "Amusement Park Dummy Found to Be Oklahoma Gunman." Robideau glanced up at her.

"What's this?"

She grinned triumphantly.

"You wanted proof. Well, there you have it. Soon as I seen Murray laid splang out in that box, I remembered this clipping he sent me a long time ago."

"It says 'dummy,' not 'mummy' . . . "

"Will you read the darn thing!"

He read the blurb. It described a bizarre occurrence. A mummified body had turned up among the props at an L.A. amusement park. Exhibited for years, it was thought to be only a mannequin until one day a worker carelessly shifted it and its arm came off, revealing human bone.

Mrs. Penrose was on the edge of her chair.

"See? Same as my Murray. Your mummy, your sideshow, the whole nine yards. Crooks take a dead man's body and make a million dollars out of it."

"But this was published long before Murray left town. If he sent it to you, then how . . ."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN *IF*? I'M TELLING YOU HE DID!"

Robideau set aside the clipping. He tried to keep his own voice in check.

"Mrs. Penrose, control yourself. I said I'd investigate. But we don't yet know for sure *what* you saw at that sideshow. We don't know for sure that it was *human*."

"But it's Murray! And Murray was human—or the next thing to it." She brought her hands to her face. "The clipping must have been a plea for help. They kept him caged for months, starving him and showing him off as the Fantastic Stick Man, then the Incredible Shrinking Man, then the Mind-Boggling Skeleton Man. And when he finally gave up the ghost, they still weren't done with him. They shoved him in that box and stuck an Amazing Mummy-man sign on him."

She was really losing it now.

"Let's stick to facts," Robideau said. "Was there a letter with this clipping? Any explanation of why he sent it to you?"

She made death-rattle sounds.

"Murray only sent postcards. A picture's worth a thousand words, he used to say; nine hundred more than he knew

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himself. There *was* no letter with it. But it's *proof!"*

"Well, I'll hang onto it for now. It's proof of something, I guess—I'm just not sure what. By the way, I'd like a snapshot of Murray if you have one. And if it turns out I need a court order to look inside that box, I'll need even more to influence Judge Hawthorn."

Mrs. Penrose ferreted out a small photo and flung it at him.

"I'll influence Judge Hawthorn, him in his Spandex jogging suit. And you can tell him I said so. You want to throw a rug over him."

"Mrs. Penrose, for heaven's sake . . . "

"I won't rest till I see justice! *Somebody's got to pay for what's happened to me!"*

She slammed the door mightily on her way out.

With the shrill presence of Mrs. Penrose no longer trembling dust off the overhead lights, Robideau prepared to investigate. He was sure the woman had taken a long step off a short dock on this one, but he had to check it out. He paused in the outer office.

"Got any Rolaids?"

"Tums. Bottom drawer."

Robideau stooped over her desk and rummaged for them.

"I think that woman has finally snapped."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Claudia Webb said.

"Lost some shingles off her roof or something." Robideau shook out a couple of Tums and popped them into his mouth. "I can't tell if she's more concerned about Murray or more concerned about herself. Heck, one time she told me she *wanted* him dead. Now all this breast-beating. *I* can't figure it out. It's got to be love."

Claudia Webb slammed a file cabinet.

"All depends," she said briskly, "what you mean by love. I mean, are you talking love as in love? Or are you talking love as in lawsuit? I mean, what *is* love when you come right down to it?"

"The question of the ages. Pretty deep stuff."

"You got that right. It's deep as calculus. Deep as the swimming pool on the *Titanic*. Love *might* be having your personal belongings tossed out the door into the street on your wedding night, I don't know."

"She did that?"

"Darn right. Slam. Out the door. Or love might be winding up in Arborg Hospital with your noggin cracked open, on account of an Electrolux vacuum cleaner she said fell off a shelf on him. Chief, I had a vac-

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uum like that one time. Thing weighed nine hundred pounds. Made out of recycled Sherman tank turrets. You needed two crowbars and a forklift to change the dustbag, never mind get it up on a shelf, and if a person *did* get it up on a shelf, and held their head under it, why then they'd deserve everything they got. They'd have it coming to them."

"Well, I'm not . . . "

"Right, I'm not, either. And when the back of his half-ton got chained to the porch, and he tried to drive away to see one of his girlfriends, and the rear bumper tore off, and the porch fell down, and he shot halfway through the windshield on account of he didn't have his seat belt buckled—was that love?"

"Um—"

"On another planet, maybe."

Robideau lounged against Claudia's desk and munched the tablets, waiting for them to perform their magic.

"So you don't think love enters into it, then?"

"I got no opinion." She slammed a drawer. "How do I know what love is on another planet? I never been there. I never been *any*where. I'll just tell you. If I had a man that wanted to go gallivanting around the world, I'd follow him. Heck, I'd *lead* him. I wouldn't wait for him to come home in a box, some kind of mummy, part of a circus."

"Well. We don't know for sure yet if . . ."

"If she'd gone with him when he asked her, this wouldn't of happened. And she wouldn't of had to hound us about support payments like she did neither. Payments which she needs lately, I might add, like a spider needs another row of toes."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the way she's been spending money the last while—greenbacks busting out all over her. Gamble? If I had what she spends on Nevadas down at the Legion in one night, I'd sweep my own life savings out the door. You don't get money like *that* from support payments, I'll tell you. Not unless your last name used to be Carson, or Reynolds, or Trump."

"Maybe she came into an inheritance."

"Maybe she came into Howard Hughes's coin collection."

Robideau looked at Claudia Webb. She was really bitter. It occurred to him it might be because she felt tied to her desk.

"I was thinking. How would you like to come out to the fairgrounds with me this afternoon? It's not another planet, but it might be a bit of a break for you . . . "

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He looked up and saw that she was already at the door with her purse tucked under her arm.

The fair was a dreary place, with an hour to go before opening. Not how he remembered it as a kid. The paint not so colorful, the lights not so bright. Like an engaging woman who'd aged over the years, now tired and less anxious to please. A large banner made a Renolike claim:

THE GREATEST LITTLE SHOW ON EARTH

The owners and managers, a couple named Lunt, lived behind the grounds in a truck and a fifth-wheel trailer. They were suspicious, demanding credentials, and even when Robideau produced his identification, they only grudgingly let him and Claudia inside.

The trailer was cluttered and dark. One of those homes where nothing is out of place because nothing has a place. And it was messy: pots and pans, soiled dishes, stacks of newspapers, and plenty of used and empty paper microwave dishes. But the remarkable thing was the clippings. Yellowing dogeared articles culled from tabloids, newspapers, and magazines and stuck up everywhere. On the walls, on the doors, even on the furniture. A quick glance revealed their theme: fiends and monstrosities; bizarre movieland creations and miscellaneous grotesqueries. It was a horror buff's delight.

The chief got down to business. He explained that there had been a complaint. He said he hoped the Lunts would be willing to cooperate with him.

They were an odd match, Lunt rough-cornered and unkempt and Mrs. Lunt quite the opposite—attractive and athletic and looking as if she could pick up her husband by the ankles and sweep out the room with him. They exchanged dark looks, and Lunt asked them gruffly to wait outside a minute. While Robideau and Claudia Webb stood in the trampled grass by the door, they heard a short and sudden row erupt between the two. Mrs. Lunt's ugly laugh:

"God, you're stupid."

"Yeah, I'm stupid. And you're a rocket scientist, right?" A door slammed. "You got some nerve talking to me like this after all that's happened. Some nerve! It's gettin' to the point I can't stand you sometimes."

Her voice brimmed with poison.

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"Only sometimes? Then I got you beat. I can't stand you *all* the time!"

Mr. Lunt came out of the trailer, gave them a humorless smile, straightened the cuffs of his gabardine shirt, and led them grudgingly off down the midway.

Robideau focused on the attractions. They had changed a great deal over the years. Hoping to calm their guide, he mumbled his observation.

"Yeah," the man grunted. He seemed to soften. "You got to keep right on top of things. People get bored quick. Take that ride there, for instance."

Turning, Robideau saw a ten foot plastic devil with a huge leering grin, its hands planted hard on its hips. Behind it was what appeared to be a giant arm tilting up into the sky, at the top of which was a cage, seemingly constructed of interleaved steel bands.

"That there's our newest," Lunt said. He popped a toothpick into his mouth. "It's called the Devil Drop—you see what it is?"

"It looks like a basket," said Claudia Webb.

"Correct." Lunt winked. "Pack the basket full of people, and *pow!*, drop 'em hollering straight down to—well. You know where."

"To hell in a handbasket," Robideau said. "Cute." He raised his eyebrows at Claudia.

They reached the Cave of Incredible Horrors. As caves went, it wasn't much, being one of those traveling-type caverns that folds down from the side of a tandem truck. It had garish posters, a ticket booth, and a ramp leading up to the door. Inside they clumped along a narrow, dark aisle to a box that was coffin-sized, had a window-lid in it, and emitted a soft whirr of refrigeration.

Claudia and the chief squeezed in for a look.

Something recognizably human gazed back at them. A form that was barely discernible through the fogged glass but that did appear aged and withered—mummylike. It wasn't swathed in the usual bandages but sported trousers, a red shirt, and a slouch hat.

But was it Murray Penrose? It wasn't all that easy to tell. It did bear some resemblance to the womanizing ne'er-do-well, having the same bulbous forehead, chisel nose, and jutting cheekbones, but there was something not quite right about it in the chief's opinion. Something about the ears. They were too big. Penrose had been a large-eared man, certainly, but with these delta wings fixed to its head, the

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mummy looked as if it might buzz the Ferris wheel like Dumbo if you unlocked the box and gave it a tailwind.

"This bears a certain resemblance to a man who used to live near here," the chief said.

"No kiddin'." Lunt sounded bored.

"In fact," the chief continued, "the man's own wife is convinced it *is* him."

"That so?"

Robideau spared the toothpick-chewing carny man a dim look. Then he turned to Claudia. "What's your opinion?"

"I dunno, chief. It *looks* like him."

Lunt snorted. "It looks like a lotta people." The toothpick traveled to the other corner of his mouth as if by magic, and he switched to a mocking voice. *"Miriam, he looks just like your ex-husband Wilbur!"* He shook his head. "A mummy's like a inkblot. Stare long enough, you see any darn thing you want in him."

"Are these actual human remains?" Robideau asked.

"That's what the sign says."

"I'm asking you."

"And I'm telling you."

"How did you come by them?"

"Trade secret."

It was tough work. Like pumping a slow well. Lots of heavy labor, and when you saw what you were getting, you weren't quite sure you wanted to swallow it. Robideau adopted a solemn tone.

"Mr. Lunt, understand something. I don't believe these are human remains, but if they are, this could be serious. There are laws about such things."

Lunt gave a short, dry laugh.

"It's a mummy. Practically a fossil. No law against fossils. Museums are full of them."

Robideau gave up the argument and scrutinized the box.

"How do you open this thing?"

"You don't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a *mummy*. It's practically *dust*. Sneeze and blow it away, you'd owe me—I dunno—ten thousand dollars."

"Do you want me to bring a court order?"

Lunt glared. Robideau outglared him. For a few moments neither man blinked; then, muttering obscenities, Lunt stepped in and threw back the lid.

"Why, it's only a mannequin," breathed Claudia Webb in surprise.

Together they peered at the pale latex face. They prodded the clothing and found it to be filled with nothing but crumpled newspapers. That settles one question, Robideau thought, but unfortunately it

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raises another. He showed Lunt the photo.

"This man is Murray Penrose. Have you seen him before?"

Lunt looked at the picture. He seemed about to say something, then thought better of it and said instead, quizzically:

"How come you're asking? Is he some kinda local celebrity?"

"As you can see, he looks a lot like your mummy."

"If you say so. *I* don't see no resemblance." Lunt spat out his toothpick. "You finished here now?"

With a sigh, Robideau nodded.

The show owner banged down the lid.

Traipsing back along the passageway, Claudia Webb whispered, "What are you thinking, chief?"

The chief grunted. "I'm thinking I better call Mrs. Penrose and give her the good news. I'm also thinking about that ten thousand dollars. I'm thinking I'd *pay* ten thousand dollars to get rid of something that looks like Murray Penrose."

The chief found Mrs. Robideau in the living room with her nose in a book. She barely glanced up.

"So," she said, "there you are. Home from the wide world of crime, are you?"

"I guess so." He glanced hopefully at the kitchen. "No dinner?"

"I'm not sure you deserve it. I've decided you're not doing your job."

He scratched his jaw. "Not doing my job?"

"That's right." She flourished the book at him. "You ought to read this. It proves you aren't keeping on top of things. I bet you didn't know there's a terrible crime wave about to engulf us. Devil worship!"

"Devil worship?"

"That's right. It's an epidemic out there—" a jerk of her head took in the entire world "—and what are you doing about it? Nothing!" She grabbed up a newspaper. "Or read this. Then you realize the big cities are so full of devil worshippers, they got no room for more." She picked up the book. "Go back to this and you find out where the excess is going—into the towns, the small towns. That's *us!* And *you* don't know the first thing about it, do you?"

Something clicked. The chief remembered. Mrs. Robideau had joined a youth crime prevention group, and her first meeting with them had taken place today. But he had as-

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sumed they'd be dealing with minor things—stolen bicycles, five and dime shoplifting. She said:

"Today we learnt how to tell if your town's on the verge of a devil worshippers' invasion."

"And are we?"

"No doubt about it. And since you've been asleep at the switch all this time, it's mostly your fault. You ought to be more *aware.*" She leaned closer and whispered huskily, "Ever notice the Jones twins? Those two girls like reflections in a mirror? Black. That's all they ever wear, those two. Black."

"Maybe they like black."

"Of *course* they like it. Witches *love* black!"

"I thought we were talking about devils."

"You know what I'm talking about." Mrs. Robideau slammed down her book. "They could *become* devils. They got the *wardrobe* for it. Witches today, devils tomorrow." She gave him a patronizing stare. "Want to know the real cause of evil in the world today?"

"Suppose you tell me," he said; "what *is* the real cause of evil?"

She beamed triumphantly. "All the bad influences on young folks, that's what. Like those magazines they sell down at the Rexall, those videos they're renting all over town, all about werewolfs and vampires . . ."

"And mummies," the chief mumbled.

"That's right, and mummies. And—" Mrs. Robideau glanced at him sharply. "Hey. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Well, I may not know much about devils," the chief admitted, "or werewolfs or vampires, but today I learned something about mummies." He told her about Elsie Penrose's strange claim. And he mentioned Elsie's odd ambivalence, as if she couldn't quite decide whether she had come to see him on Murray's behalf or on her own.

Mrs. Robideau looked horrified.

"Murray Penrose? A *mummy?* But mummies are dried up old crusty Egyptians. Murray was crusty, but was he Egyptian?"

"He was English," the chief said. "Anyway, the mummy was a fake. I looked."

"But if it *looked* like Murray Penrose . . . what does it mean?"

"You tell me." The chief hung up his jacket with a sigh. "A faked cadaver resembling a missing person. Coincidence? Probably. I don't know."

Mrs. Robideau said knowingly, "There are no coinci-

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dences in this world." She poked her finger at him. "What if Murray was a victim of devil worshiping? Did that occur to you? What if he was killed for some mysterious reason, and they made a copy of him to use in their Satanic rituals? Then the Lunts somehow got him and stuck him in their show."

The chief looked fixedly at her.

"Are you finished?"

She shook her head. "Not quite. There's Mrs. Penrose, too. Now I think of it, *she* might be a devil worshipper. She's not the pleasantest person ever slammed a shopping cart into your ankle at the Safeway. I think you ought to start with those Lunts. Start investigating them right now."

"I have *no* intention of investigating them."

"See? You don't do your job."

The chief was too hungry to argue.

"You're right. I don't do my job. In fact, I work my tail off not doing it. Now what's for dinner?"

"We'll have dinner," she said, picking up her book, "when you've solved this crime wave."

The chief arrived at work the next day feeling hungry and irritable. He was about to ask Claudia Webb to send across the street to the Netley for a coffee and a fried egg sandwich when she gave him the thumbs-down sign and jerked her head toward his office. He saw why. Lunt was lying in wait for him there, and he looked about as hungry as Robideau felt. Ready to kill something and eat it raw on the rug.

"I want to talk to you!" he blurted out before the chief could get halfway through the door.

"So I see." The chief took his chair with a sigh. "Can I help you somehow?"

Lunt looked him up and down. "I kinda doubt it. But since you're the only game in town, I guess I hafta take a chance on you, don't I? About that mummy."

"Yes."

"You're worried about it."

Sure. Worried sick, the chief wanted to say, but he scraped up an accommodating smile. "I'm listening."

"Okay, listen to this. First off," Lunt said, dragging a chair up to the desk and plunking his bony backside in it, "I want you to know right off the hop that I didn't have nothing to do with it."

Robideau's eyebrows went up. "Nothing to do with what?"

Nervously, Lunt frowned, picked up a pencil, and began making little x marks on Robi-

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deau's desk pad. "If you haven't run a check on me yet, you're probably going to, so I come here to save you the trouble. What happened back in Portland, that's all over with—water under the bridge, okay?" Robideau nodded, playing along. "I made a mistake. I served my time. It's over and done with. There's no way I'd of touched that Penner. Oh, I'd of blown up at him, maybe. Hollered at him, I guess. But hell, after what he did, I think he had that much coming, don't you?"

Robideau shook his head, confused.

"Penner?"

"That guy in your photograph."

"Don't you mean Penrose?"

"I don't know no Penrose. He said his name was Penner, Marty Penner, and that's what I called him. We met him in Presque Isle. He wanted a job, and we gave him one. He was friendly, and we got to like him. Smart, too. The mummy was his idea—he seen the sideshow needed something, and so he suggested it. Hell, he *modeled* for it. We did a face mask of him—you know—with that special rubber?" Lunt gave a dry laugh. "Funny. That mummy clipping hanging right there in front of us every day, and it took someone like him to come along and notice it and make something out of it."

"Mummy clipping?" It was one surprise after another. "You mean this one?" The chief brought out Mrs. Penrose's yellowed scrap of newsprint, and Lunt scowled at it.

"That's right. Where'd you get it?"

"Never mind. Go on with your story."

Lunt sat back with his forehead a network of creases. A little less sure of himself.

"We got along good for a while. Then, well, somebody started dipping into the cash receipts. I didn't say nothing at first. I wasn't sure, you see. I hoped I was wrong. But I came to the conclusion that's what Penner was up to." Lunt thumped his fist on the desk. "The way you handle that kind of thing, you either put the law on the guy or you just get rid of him. I planned to get rid of him."

Robideau cocked his head.

"Oh, hey, nothing like that," Lunt said hastily. "I mean I was going to *dump* him. Recover what I could and then *fire* him."

"But you didn't?"

"I couldn't. I didn't get the chance. He run off. He got wind somehow that I was onto him, I guess, and yesterday morning

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he was gone. Never even packed a bag."

"I see," Robideau said. He thought for a moment or two, then said, "This clipping." He held it up again. "You said it was 'hanging there.' I take it you mean that it was pinned to the wall with all those others at your place?"

Lunt nodded.

Robideau scratched his head. "And when did this fellow —Penner—come to work for you?"

"Ten months ago. A year, maybe."

"Do you recall if at any time he took the clipping off the wall? Did you ever see it in his hand?"

Lunt thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Nope. Nope. I can't say I did. He didn't have to take it down. It was right there at eye level, that's how he noticed it."

"So he never had it in his possession?"

"No. I've looked at it lots of times since, and the first I noticed it was missing was last night." He narrowed his eyes. "Tell you the truth, I thought maybe you had taken it."

"Believe me, I didn't."

"Then how . . ." Lunt ogled the clipping, gave up with a snort. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

He got to his feet and clapped his greasy hat back on his head. "Well, that's all I come here to say. The guy you're looking for—if it's Penner—took off on us, and I don't know where he went. But I can tell you this: I never laid a finger on him, and I don't want nobody saying I did. I thought about this all night and decided I better come here and be right up front with you about it in case . . . well, you know what I mean."

"I appreciate it."

"So that's an end of it, right?"

"I'll let you know," Robideau said. He followed Lunt to the door, his curiosity aroused. "By the way. What *did* happen in Portland?"

Lunt looked him square in the eye.

"I killed a man that worked for me."

"Why?"

"He stayed in bed too much."

Claudia Webb was reading a travel brochure when the chief stepped into the outer office after Lunt had gone. She listened to his account of what had transpired, then gave a shrug of her shoulders.

"He's right. That's an end of it. It makes sense Murray would use an alias. He was a man on the run. And the mummy looks like him because he modeled for it. When he got caught with his fingers in the

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till, he ran off again. If Lunt doesn't want to press charges, there you go. End of story."

"Not quite," Robideau said.

"No?"

"There's one unanswered question."

"Like what?"

"Like how Mrs. Penrose came to be in possession of that newspaper clipping."

Claudia Webb looked up from a foldout of a Caribbean paradise.

"That is a puzzler, isn't it?"

"Yes. If the clipping only went missing yesterday, then her story of Murray sending it to her months ago doesn't wash."

"Maybe Lunt's wrong about when it disappeared."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe there were two clippings the same."

"Both with a pinhole in them from being stuck on a wall? I doubt it."

"You'll just have to ask her, I guess."

"I'm leaving now. Want to come?"

She got up hurriedly. "I always did want a peek inside that house."

"Mrs. Penrose," the chief said sternly, "you got to level with me about this."

They were sitting in a tiny drawing room that had heavy brocade curtains and plush new oversized furniture. There the luxury ended. It was tastefully furnished with bingo winnings: several black velvet Elvis paintings in various sizes on the walls, two clocks set in varnished logs, a lamp poking out of a plaster bust of Marilyn Monroe. Tacky. And shoved under the couch across from him, Robideau spotted something else—lottery stubs, boxes of them. Nevadas, Quick-Picks, all kinds. Some crammed in loose, and some bundled in rubber bands. Clearly Mrs. Penrose liked to gamble. But with what? She was indignant.

"Listen here, Robdough. I pay your salary. If you're questioning my honesty—"

"Not your honesty, Mrs. Penrose, just your facts." He explained the problem. "You said you'd received the clipping months ago, but Lunt insists it was pinned to his wall right up until yesterday. So you see why I came here to ask you about it."

"I can see why you ought to ask *him*."

"You're saying he's wrong?"

"I'm saying he lied. But I don't see that it matters. If the mummy's a fake, and some guy named Penner modeled for it,

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I'm withdrawing my complaint. You can forget about it."

The chief's stomach rumbled. Claudia glanced at him. He shrugged, helpless.

"Well, I still have this conflict. Your word against Lunt's."

Mrs. Penrose sighted down her thin nose at him.

"Mr. Robdough. You *know* who I am—*I pay your salary!* He, on the other hand, is a professional trickster, *and an ex-convict to boot!"*

They got back in the car, and Robideau winced, splaying his hand across his gut. Claudia rummaged her bottle of Tums out of her purse and passed it to him. "I thought you might need these."

He helped himself gratefully. "Thanks. Now if you could only make Mrs. Penrose go away . . ."

"I might. You putting a contract out on her?"

"Don't tempt me."

He should have stopped at the Burger King.

Puffed wheat. That's all there was in the house. The canned goods were gone, there were no eggs, no bread, *no milk.* He didn't like puffed wheat at the best of times, and he certainly couldn't eat it without milk.

Trying an experiment, he took instant creamer, a two pound six ounce jar of it, mixed some with water, and, presto!, came up with a liquid that looked like milk, even *smelled* like milk—but when he tasted the stuff, his stomach resumed its smoldering.

He took a bowl of dry puffed wheat into the other room. Mrs. Robideau, appearing plump and well-fed these days—no doubt from heaps of doughnuts and sandwiches waded through at her Crime Stoppers meetings—was reading occult books under the lamp.

"Have you arrested those devil worshippers yet?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not."

"Better get a move on. They'll be taking over soon." She pursed her lips; then said, *"I* would start by impounding all the Lunts' devil worshiping stuff."

He sat down. He put some puffed wheat in his mouth and munched it. "Maybe you would," he said between chews, "but I don't work that way. I'm not a law unto myself, and they're within their rights. They're not even in my jurisdiction, if it comes to that."

"Crime is where you find it."

"I'd be committing the crime. Unlawful expropriation of property."

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"It wouldn't be theft. You could just burn it. All that scary stuff, including that mummy . . ."

"It's not a mummy, it's a *dummy,* I told you. The Lunts made it themselves. Face, head, and neck."

"If you ask me," Mrs. Robideau said firmly, "those Lunts are in this thing right *up* to their necks."

"In what thing?"

"Murray's murder."

"Murder? Good grief, even Mrs. Penrose isn't pounding that drum any more. Don't be ridiculous. He ran away, that's all. It's his favorite stunt. There's no reason to think otherwise."

"Look," she said, "you were sitting here for months—years!—with a missing person problem, right? And then these Lunts come waltzing along with a trailer full of devil worshiping lore, and a reasonable facsimile of the very man you're looking for. And if that's not enough, they're charging three dollars a peek for a look at him."

"What's that last bit got to do with it?"

"Well, it makes them guilty of theft. There's no way Murray's worth that much, dead or alive."

The chief peevishly shoved his puffed wheat aside.

"If they need a real dead body," he told Mrs. Robideau flatly, "tell them to wait. They can have mine. It'll be ready soon, just plain starved to death!"

"By the way," Mrs. Robideau said, "I run into Mrs. Pebbleridge today, down at the store. She had a gaggle of women around her that you wouldn't believe. I thought she must be giving away Mary Kay samples or something, but no, she was telling them about her trip to the fair with Elsie Penrose. You know what *she* said?"

The chief shrugged. His stomach rumbled. He should go grab a burger, then stop by Lunt's again. Who could tell? Maybe Lunt's recollection had changed. Stranger things had happened.

"Are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening."

"*She* said it was all *Elsie's* idea that they go there. She said Elsie called *her* up, and just about dragged *her* into that mummy-man exhibit. Now what do you think about that?"

Lunt's wife wasn't home, and that suited Robideau fine. Lunt was far more accommodating, too, reacting warmly, even rooting out a bottle and splashing rum into a couple of glasses. Robideau watched him, pondering Mrs. Penrose's remarkable

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eye. Lunt was unkempt and rough-looking, but that was scarcely uncommon among working men; he looked no more like an ex-con than thousands of others. "I hope," Lunt said, "You came here to tell me you're through digging into that complaint."

"I'm almost through."

"Almost?" Lunt snorted. "Whatever that means."

"It means I've got a few loose ends to tie up."

As Lunt rummaged in the freezer for ice, Robideau wandered over to inspect the collection of clippings that bristled on the wall. There were hundreds of them. They were so numerous they formed layers, which is what he had hoped for. The feature he was looking for jumped out at him instantly, a lighter shade in the shape of the mummy clipping on one of the others. The clipping bearing the lighter mark also had a pencilled date, showing it to be less than one month old. So although the chief couldn't say with certainty that Lunt had been telling the truth, it was apparent to him that Mrs. Penrose hadn't been.

"Quite a collection, huh?" Lunt said, pressing a cold, clinking glass into Robideau's hand.

"It certainly is," the chief agreed. "Some of these go back years. You must have been at it for some time."

He laughed.

"Not me, mister. My wife. It's a hobby of hers, gathering that sort of stuff."

"You don't share her interest?"

"We don't share a lot of things. Not any more." His face clouded; then he forced a grin. "But, chief, that's another story. Happy days."

They drank to happiness.

Mrs. Penrose sat by the phone. She had been mounting vigil over it ever since Murray had gone raging out of the house that first night. She suddenly realized she was glaring at it as if by sheer willpower she could force it to cough up that call, that single call, the one she meant to pounce on and get all the anger and pent-up hostility out of her system once and for all.

"Call me," she hissed angrily. *"I dare you!"*

It had been out of character for her to just sit there and let herself be verbally abused like that. Murray, overreacting, hollering and screaming at her like a crazy man. Why had she allowed *him* to make all the noise?

Who could fault her now for wanting to dole out some come-

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uppance? After all, what right did Murray have to do *any* hollering, when it came right down to it? *She* was the one left penniless for years. *Naturally* she had spent a little cash when he'd finally come to his senses about his obligations and sent her some. But it wasn't as if she had wasted it; she'd been *investing* it.

He'd be singing a different damn tune if one of those tickets had actually won.

But now he had run off again, and if he didn't phone soon and give her a chance to tear a strip off him the size of a hall runner, and vent this fury that was raging inside her, then . . . well, she didn't know what she would do. Pounce on the first person who stepped through her door, most likely. Slap them into the middle of next week. Oh, if only he would *call!* If only . . .

The phone rang. The sound struck so harshly at her keyed-up nerves, she practically jumped out of her skin. She snatched the receiver and pressed it hard against her ear.

"Yes?"

But it was only Mrs. Pebbleridge. *Why* couldn't the old busybody leave her alone?

"You okay?" Mrs. Pebbleridge asked.

"Fine," Mrs. Penrose snapped, "just *fine.*"

"Thought I'd call up and make sure you were all right after that terrible shock you got the other day. I heard the chief checked it out and it was only a false alarm. But it sure looked like Murray to us, didn't it? Must of been a trick of the light, or maybe that misted-up glass, I don't know."

"Mrs. Pebbleridge, get off the phone! I'm expecting a—"

" 'Course, I got to thinking later we ought to of known from the ears. Heck, Murray never had ears as big as that. I mean, his were *big,* but nothing like the screen doors on *that* thing."

"Mrs. Pebbleridge, get—"

"And it appears I wasn't the only one who thought so, neither. I stopped by again today to take another look—I just *had* to show Mrs. Aird what had got you so rattled, she just *had* to know!—and well, you'll never guess what!"

"What?" Mrs. Penrose snapped.

"You'll never guess."

"I don't *want* to guess!"

"Well, I'll tell you then. They fixed 'em up."

"Fixed what up?"

"My goodness, you're snippy today, aren't you?" Mrs. Pebbleridge cleared a mittful of phlegm out of her throat with annoyance. "I mean the ears, of course. They're normal size now—like somebody went at

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them with a will and a pair of sidecutters. It's a whole lot better likeness of Murray. In fact it looks almost—"

Mrs. Penrose hung up the phone. From the wall a sullen Elvis glared back at her. When she finally jumped up, slipped her sweater over her shoulders, and hurried out of the house, her jaw muscles were sore from grinding her teeth together.

"We got along fine, me and the wife, back when we started," Lunt was saying. "It was my dad's business, see, and after he died I needed help to run it. My wife, Burl, was a roustabout we'd hired that year, and her and me had got kinda—well—close."

"A roustabout?"

"You know, what we call a hired hand. We'd never took on a woman for that kind of work usually, but she was good at it. Damn good. Strong for her size, and she never minded heights. I hate heights myself, so I was glad to have someone who could check and make sure the setups and teardowns went right, ride herd on the crew. She still does that. And she keeps the books."

"So—uh—what do you do?"

"Me? My job is to keep everything else running smoothly. Get the permits. Decide what attractions to spice up or replace. Muscle the men when I have to." He took a slug of rum, his eyes vacant. "That's how we started. An' then that—trouble—come along. I went to prison."

"Ah yes," Robideau said curiously, "the fellow who stayed in bed too much."

"That's right. And he did stay in bed too much," Lunt said bitterly. He took a slug of rum. "With my wife."

"Oh." An overcast seemed to lift in Robideau's mind. Shadows lightened. But some thick patches of cloud still hung there doggedly. "And while you were away, she ran things on her own?"

"Yeah. But she lost money. She admitted that to me later when I asked her why the books looked so bad. It was too much for one person. That's why she took me back again."

"She took *you* back?" The chief was surprised. *"You* didn't hold a grudge?"

"No. I was over that. Sure, you hear how cons wait years and years to get even, but that don't hardly happen. You can't stay mad that long. And if you got any sense, once you're out you try to kick-start your life again. That's what I did. Besides, she swore to me that other guy had led her into it. She swore nothing like that

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would ever happen again. And I believed her. Still do."

Mrs. Penrose roared down Highway 8 with the pedal flat down. She swooped into the fairgrounds, leaving a cloud of limestone dust wafting above the parking lot. It was the height of the evening. Crowds of people from Gimli, Arnes, Riverton, and Arborg spilled along the midway amid the hollering of the barkers and the roar of the rides. She scurried straight down the midway to the Cave, butterflies beating madly in her breast, paid her admission, and rushed inside. Then she slowed down. It was dark in here, and scary. There was a close, musty smell. The plywood flooring creaked under her as she crept past the Wolfman and the Frankenstein monster.

She stopped at the mummy's humming box.

She meant to get a clearer look at the mummy this time, and hoped that the glass wasn't too misted up. But when she gazed down, her heart felt a little twitch of frustration. The inside humidity must have gone up for some reason, both it and the refrigeration conspiring against her. She could barely see anything at all.

Fine, then. She would just have to open the lid. She ran her fingers over the box and behind it—there had to be a lever or a button somewhere—but she found nothing. She was about to give up in frustration when her hand suddenly brushed against a catch on the underside edge. She pressed it, and the lid sprang up an inch.

She closed her eyes, took a quick breath for courage, then heaved up the lid and peered inside.

The lighting was poor. But, yes, the face was still Murray's, all right. The pouchy eyes, sagging cheeks, and pale face. But it was the ears she had come to look at, and the ears—well, the ears were definitely . . .

Smaller!

A cool dread seized her.

But she couldn't stop now.

She had to know.

Steeling herself, she carefully slid her left hand under the mummy's head, then lifted.

It should have moved easily. This was only a dummy. But it wouldn't budge.

Why not?

Because it was firmly attached to a neck, a pair of shoulders, and—

"YOW!" Mrs. Penrose cried.

She threw herself back against the wall and watched the lid crash down.

An icy voice said from the shadows: "You're the one that

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killed him, you know! It's *your fault!*"

"You know, it's ironic," the chief said, "when you think of it. Nobody would have twigged to him if he hadn't modeled for that mummy. It's a heck of a good likeness—except, of course, for the ears."

Lunt grinned wryly.

"The ears were a problem. They wouldn't set right, so we made 'em by hand. They came out on the big side but, hey, like I told Marty and the wife, we don't claim to be no Madame Tussaud's!" He nodded. "Marty hated those ears. He was a stickler for detail. The refrigeration was his idea. He said it would convince any doubters, and at the same time it would cloud up the glass."

"It did that all right."

"Absolutely." Lunt dipped back into his rum.

Mrs. Penrose stumbled onto the midway. People swarmed around her. They grinned at her obvious terror: here was one customer who had obviously gotten her money's worth. "There's a killer in there!" she gasped, and some of them laughed out loud. She pushed past them and clumped up a ramp. Someone yelled, "Hey, lady—" as she ducked through a doorway. The sign above it read:

MADDENING MIND-MAZE OF MIRRORS!

She stopped uncertainly. Her heart was pounding. She was surrounded, hemmed in by glass panels. Light from the midway filtered through and lit the place with a ghostly glow. She thought, *My God, I'm in the crazy house!*

But why shouldn't she be in the crazy house? She was crazy for coming here. Crazy for not realizing that she could be next.

She heard a soft footfall on the ramp, let out a soft whinny of fear, and hurried forward, into the maze. Watch the floor, she told herself. The floor won't fool you, it'll—

Tonk!

Her bowed head rebounded off a reflective panel. She staggered, then pressed onward, hands splayed wide like a blind woman's. A glint of hope struck her. Maybe this wasn't so bad. Maybe if it was hard for her to move through this maze, it would be just as hard for her pursuer. And if she could get to the end of the maze first, she'd be free to make a dash for her car.

Robideau accepted another

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splash of rum from Lunt, then edged into his next point tactfully. "I don't mean to shove this on you, but . . ."

"I know what you're gonna say," Lunt responded.

"Well, I just can't help wondering if this wasn't the old problem all over again. I mean," he said, "what if Penrose got *too* friendly, and your wife . . ."

"Careful," Lunt growled.

"I'll put it this way: your wife was . . . well . . . vulnerable."

Lunt seemed to prefer that adjective, but his gaze remained baleful. "That's right, you couldn't blame her. But if you think that she . . . well, you'd be just plain wrong about that, chief."

"You have to excuse me for thinking like a cop," Robideau said, "but when I think of the money, from what you've said there was no way Murray could have taken it. He had no access to the receipts."

Lunt seemed to be shrinking in his chair. These unwelcome ideas were clearly not new to him. The rum glimmered in his eyes. He shook his head stubbornly.

"No. You're wrong. She had nothing to do with it. It *had* to be him. It was all *his* fault. I was his friend, and he robbed me—"

"But he never handled the cash. And he didn't know red ink from black. Who was it who counted the proceeds each night? And who was it who took care of the books?"

Lunt shook violently.

"No. You're saying she was stealing. You're saying she cheated on me again. She wouldn't of done those things. She's changed. And this is our business. She couldn't . . . she . . ." He blinked a few times, then slipped desperately back into his theme. "He's the one responsible! He's responsible for everything!"

Robideau set down his glass. "All right. You blame him. But then that leaves me kind of puzzled. Why did you bother to fix Penner's ears?"

Lunt glanced up, red-eyed. "What?"

"Fix his ears. I stopped by the Cave for a look at the mummy tonight. The ears are better now. They looked almost . . ."

He stood up very suddenly.

The mirrors were reflective, but they were also transparent. It made matters worse, added to her confusion. Looking through them, she could see the mirrors beyond them, and the mirrors beyond those ones . . .

She froze.

She could see her pursuer. A small figure. Three, four, *five*

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identical pursuers coming after her. But which was the real one? Which were reflections?

Her pursuer moved confidently. The maze was no hindrance. How was it possible?

Her hands fluttering like antennae, she shambled left, right, left, trying to escape. For one horrifying moment, it would seem as if she was about to step straight into the killer's arms, then her hands would meet glass, and she would be led in another direction.

Her pursuer seemed so *sure*. So terribly confident!

Then, she stepped out of the mirror-maze.

She was standing at the top of a short flight of steps that led down to the midway. But somehow the short figure had gotten there first: There was no protective glass panel between the two of them this time. Elsie felt sick. She had tried to escape, but she had failed.

"Hold it there!" a gruff voice barked.

She felt the strength go out of her legs, and she slumped weakly against the glass.

Chief Robideau had no illusions that his order would be obeyed. But his sudden shout did cause the killer to turn, leap from the platform, and vanish among the trailers grouped in pooled darkness beyond.

"No more victims," Robideau muttered. "Please, God. Not tonight . . ."

It was dark among the trailers. He risked spraining an ankle. And the rum he had consumed wasn't helping. But he made his way through somehow and reemerged into the light where the midway folded back on itself. Before him was the Drop of Death, its giant arm climbing away in trestled humps up into the sky, its huge basket a massive pendulous shape at the end of it.

The chief saw a movement up there and didn't hesitate. He jumped onto the platform and started to climb the arm. There were footholds every few feet—for roustabout access he guessed—and soon he was well above the glowing midway, the lighted loops of the Ferris wheel not too much higher than he was.

The basket was just ahead of him. A figure perched next to it.

It was Burl Lunt, and she held a wrench in her hand the size of the average garden spade.

"Chief," she said, with a strange sneer on her face. "here's a pop quiz for you. Do you believe it's the fall that kills you, or do you think it's

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the sudden stop?" The sneer broadened. "Marty used to ask me that. And he finally found out."

"Why'd you do it?"

She ignored the question.

"We used to sit here for hours. Dream. Make plans. It was a great place to hide, we knew *he* wouldn't stumble over us. I told Marty how I'd been planning my escape for years, and he laughed at that, so I showed him the cash I'd saved. He said that he had been all over the world and knew the best places to invest. So I said, go for it. Why not?"

"You let Murray take care of your money?"

"The plan was, we'd escape together. But then we arrived in this rotten place. I followed Marty to a strange house, found out he had a *wife,* and that he had invested the money all right—*with her!* It was *all gone! Every dime!"* There was animal rage in her voice. "We met here the next day and he tried to b.s. me about it. So I said, 'Look, Marty, I can see your house from here.' He still kept playing dumb with me, so I thumped him." She hefted the wrench.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"But he doublecrossed me!" A snarl escaped her. "He sent all my money to that horrible witch." The wind played in her hair. "And he didn't trust *me!* Isn't that a riot?"

"Give me the wrench," Robideau said gently.

"Sure. I'll give it to you."

She lunged and swung it at him.

The chief ducked. But he thought he'd been hit. There was an explosion of light and sound—brilliant neon, thunderous music, flashing strobes. The huge arm lurched under them and started to tilt. Robideau fell on his belly, grabbed an armful of steel, and hung on tight. The ten foot Satan down below came alive, wobbling left and right, cackling insanely with laughter.

The chief caught a glimpse of Lunt standing calmly below, with his hand still resting on the knife switch he'd thrown.

Burl Lunt dropped the wrench. Her eyes snapped open. She flung out her arms like a balancing acrobat and backed clumsily up the rounded nub of the rising arm, trying to keep a level surface under her. She staggered and nearly fell as the arm clunked into position.

A whistle blew, a Klaxon howled.

And the Handbasket fell.

Burl Lunt's pretty mouth made a round red O. She might have been screaming. There

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was no way to tell. The basket rushed down on her like a runaway freight car, and in a thunder of steel wheels, it swept her away.

It plunged to ground level, decelerated violently, then stopped with a squeal of brakes. There was a silence. Everything stopped. Satan froze in mid-smile as though lobotomized. Then people began to yell all at once. The chief closed his eyes. His stomach throbbed gently.

"So," Mrs. Robideau said, passing the salt and pepper, "you finally got the truth out of Elsie Penrose. Did you have to yank her fingernails off with rusty pliers?"

"No," the chief said matter-of-factly. "As much as I would have liked to, it wasn't necessary. She was ready to tell me what she knew, and the rest of it I pieced together."

"Good. Now you can tell *me.*"

"Well, it's pretty simple really. One thing just seems to have led to another. Lunt's wife began skimming cash receipts some time ago, building a runaway fund for herself. When she took up with Murray, she trusted him with the money, and Murray promptly began sending it to Elsie."

"Why didn't he hang onto it?"

"That's one of the pieced-together parts. I think he saw that Burl wasn't one of the most stable people, and that her marriage wasn't one of the most stable marriages. I suppose he felt that Lunt could wise up to what was going on at any minute—which he did, eventually—and so he wanted to put the money out of reach."

Mrs. Robideau looked doubtful. "But sending it to Elsie? *She* wouldn't have gone with him. Did he mean to run off with *her?*"

The chief shook his head. "I don't think he meant to run off with Elsie, Burl, or anyone else. He meant to go by himself. But he wanted the money."

The chief helped himself to more mashed potatoes.

"He probably meant to pull his old disappearing act the moment the fair arrived. He went straight to Elsie's, taking the clipping along so he could do a little bragging and set her mind at rest. He meant to pick up the money, and she might not be so suspicious of him if she thought he had some stake in the business. Besides, he was proud of that exhibit. But when he saw how alarmed Elsie was at his appearance, and found she couldn't produce the money, he blew up and started hollering. He told her exactly

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how he had come by it, taunted her about his infidelities, and went storming off. He left the clipping behind, he was so upset."

"And Elsie went looking for him?"

"The very next day. She wanted a showdown. She dragged Mrs. Pebbleridge along—a little different version of things from the story she first gave me—wanting some backup in case Murray got out of hand with her. But she couldn't find Murray, and she got madder and madder the whole time. Then, when she saw that mummy lying there with Murray's grin spread all over its face, something snapped. She started to yell."

"She came to see you because she was mad?"

"That's right. A woman spurned, and all that. By then she didn't care who got hurt. Murray, the Lunts, whoever got in her way." He shook his head. "It's funny. While I was trying to get Lunt to give me a peek at some jury-rigged rubber and newspaper, the real Murray was probably within shouting distance. He couldn't have known that, later, Mrs. Lunt would stuff *him* into the mummy box. She couldn't have found a better place. I had already looked there."

"So Mrs. Lunt wasn't a devil worshipper?"

"No. Just fascinated by the macabre. Not so different from millions of other people, really."

"What'll happen to her husband, now?"

There was a silence. Their eyes locked for a moment, and he gravely shook his head.

Mrs. Robideau stood up.

"Well, then. How's the stomach?"

"It's fine."

"Are you ready for some apple crisp?"

"I sure am. But first I'd like seconds on the roast beef, if that's okay with you."

"It's okay with me," she said. "I suppose you deserve it."

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UNSOLVED

by

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

Along the tropical shores of the Cabaranean Sea are clustered three tiny republics—Xanta, Yubba, and Zigal—all dwarfed by their inland neighbor and traditional enemy, the kingdom of Quidonia. For centuries the kings of Quidonia have sought to overthrow and overrun the small republics to acquire port facilities, but always the three little countries have banded together to thwart the ever-threatening aggression.

Their chief defense has been a Secret Service that has kept them alerted to new and continuing devious attempts by Quidonia. Each republic has relied on one agent, a master of disguises and an expert in intrigue. These three Secret Service chiefs are known by their code names of Alligator, Bass, and Cayman. Although their identities have been hidden from Quidonia spies, they are well known to one another and share significant information.

Recently, because of the advanced ages of the three chiefs and because of new activity on the part of the common enemy, El Presidente in each of the republics appointed a young assistant to his old Secret Service chief. Each assistant reported for duty in a long trenchcoat, wide-brimmed hat, gloves, and dark glasses, much to the disgust of his superior. The three young assistants chose the code names Darter, Eel, and Fish.

Shortly after the new appointments, the chiefs were alarmed to discover that the defenses of their republics were known to the king of Quidonia. The only logical explanation pointed to a traitor among the new assistants.

The three old and trusted chiefs decided to visit Quidonia in disguise, each taking his assistant along but keeping a watchful eye upon his activities. While there, they hoped to pick up important tips from their reliable paid informants inside Quidonia.

They were soon rewarded. At the border, the Customs agent whispered to Alligator, "Beware the man with the missing finger." On the ride to the hotel, the cab driver turned to Bass and said in

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a low voice, "Trust not the young man with the tattooed chest." And as he stepped into his hotel room, Cayman was handed a note by the bellboy that read: "The traitor is bald!"

At a hurried conference, the old agents concluded that their suspicions were justified. One assistant was a traitor. But surely among the three, only one would have a missing finger, a tattooed chest, *and* a bald head.

(1) The old agents include Karlos, Señor Tamaro, and the man posing as a banker. Their assistants include Jorge, Señor Rogale, and the man posing as a dealer.
(2) The strategy adopted by the senior agents was for each to spy upon the assistant of another. When they met again, old Isaac reported, "I checked out young Señor Valdez in the pool; he has no tattoo on his chest—and very little hair." Cayman declared, "The young assistant from Xanta has all his fingers, as I observed in the lavatory." Then old Luis spoke up: "Señor Undino wears a wig! It fell into his soup at lunch."
(3) The old agent posing as a banker learned that the young assistant posing as an artist had a seductive mermaid tattooed on his chest. Neither man was from Zigal.
(4) Juan, Señor Tamaro, and the agent posing as an engineer are from different republics.
(5) Señor Waledo and the old agent acting as a farmer (neither of them from Yubba) discussed the young assistants: Fish, Manuel, and Señor Undino.
(6) Señor Suarez and the old agent acting as a clerk kept an eye on the latter's assistant, Fish. None of them is from Xanta.
(7) Alligator found that the assistants from the other two republics, Fish and Jorge, were *both* bald.
(8) Eel did not impersonate an engineer.

Alligator, Bass, and Cayman figured out who was betraying the republics. The greedy young man disappeared. No trace of him was ever discovered. Only the chiefs of the three Secret Services know his fate.

Who was the traitor with the missing finger, the tattooed chest, and the bald head? From which country did he come?

See page 119 for the solution to the January puzzle.

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(continued from page 4)

Alan Gordon's "Do Not Go Quiescent into That Frozen Night," from our April 1994 issue.

"Hitchcock's Monthly Mystery" can be found on CompuServe in two places: (1) the Mystery and Suspense library of the Literary Forum (found under Arts/Music/Literature) or (2) the Time Warner Electronic Publishing section titled Authors Forum (go to Libraries and then to Mystery Writers).

On America Online, in the Writer's Club libraries, it can also be found in two places: (1) the Fiction Library or (2) the E-zine Library.

As promised in our Mid-December issue, the following is the list of nominees for and winners of the Shamus awards given by the Private Eye Writers of America at Bouchercon this past October. Winners are in boldface type.

BEST P.I. NOVEL OF 1993:

***The Devil Knows You're Dead* by Lawrence Block (Morrow)**

Foursome by Jeremiah Healy (Pocket)

Wolf in the Shadows by Marcia Muller (Mysterious)

Moth by James Sallis (Carroll & Graf)

The Lies That Bind by Judith Van Gieson (Harper)

BEST ORIGINAL P.I. PAPERBACK NOVEL OF 1993:

***Brothers and Sinners* by Rodman Philbrick (NAL)**

The Half-Hearted Detective by Milton Bass (Pocket)

A Minyan for the Dead by Richard Fliegel (Pocket)

Shadow Games by Ed Gorman (Blake, London)

Torch Town Boogie by Steven Womack (Ballantine)

BEST FIRST P.I. NOVEL OF 1993:

***Satan's Lambs* by Lynn S. Hightower (Walker)**

Brotherly Love by Randye Lordon (St. Martin's)

By Evil Means by Sandra West Prowell (Walker)

BEST P.I. SHORT STORY OF 1993:

"The Merciful Angel of Death" by Lawrence Block *(The New Mystery,* Dutton)

"The Sultans of Soul" by Doug Allyn (EQMM)

"Nobody Wins" by Charles Ardai (AHMM)

"The Bagged Man" by Jeremiah Healy (EQMM)

"The Watts Lion" by Walter Mosley *(The New Mystery,* Dutton)

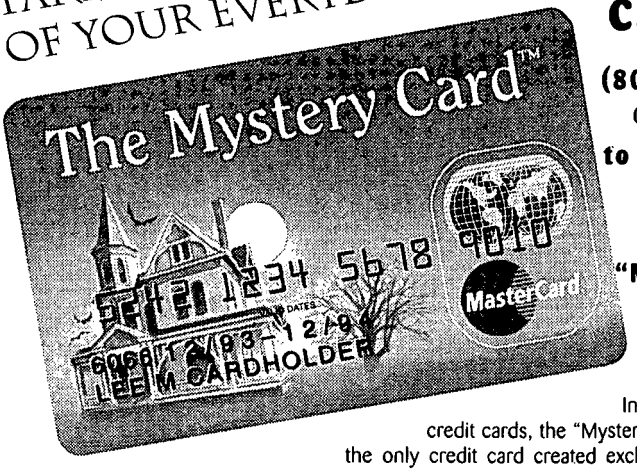
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD:

Stephen J. Cannell, TV writer and producer

(continued on page 154)

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LIKE FATHER

Frank Snyder

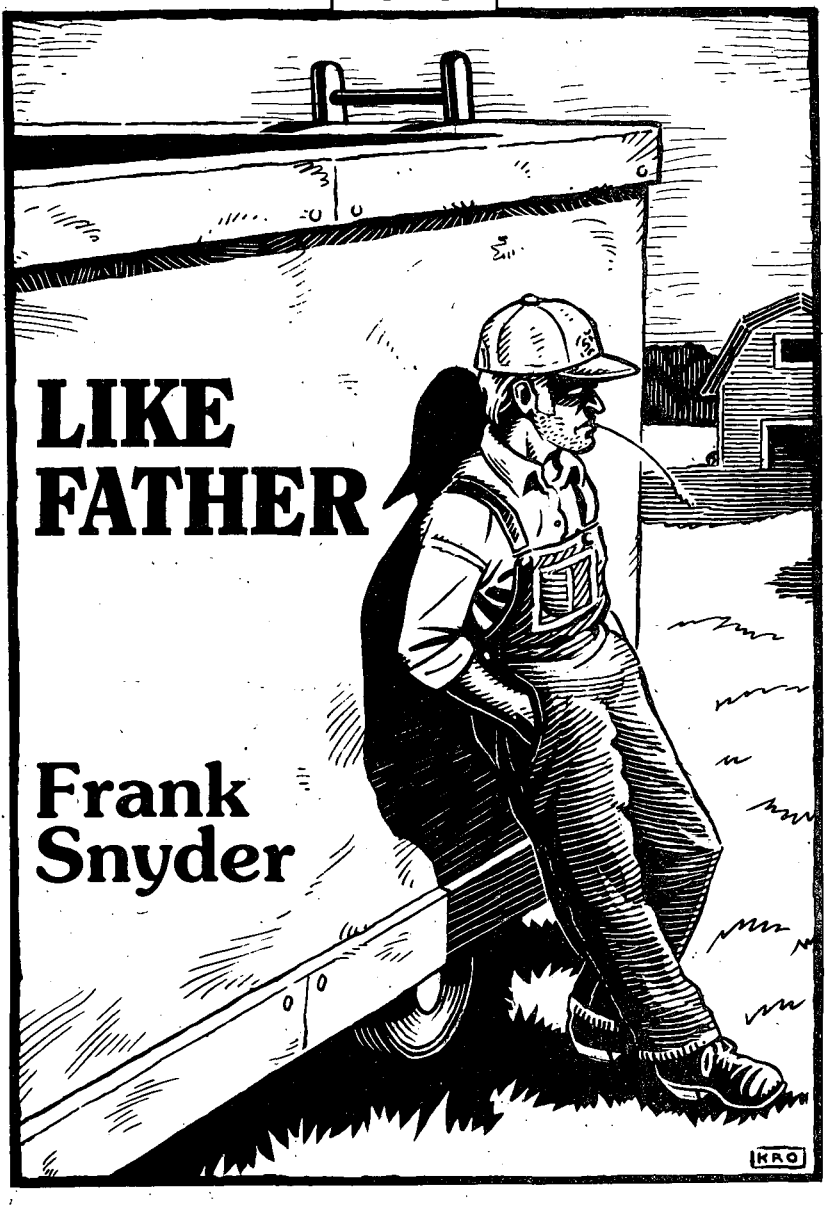


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Some folks like to say that Missourians are the most hardheaded, tightfisted people on earth. In Missouri, they say that the most hardheaded, tightfisted people in the state live in De Soto County. And in De Soto County it was generally recognized that the most hardheaded, tightfisted man alive was Earl Peckwood.

Earl farmed a couple of hundred acres over in Vadeboncoeur township, mostly wheat and soybeans with a small hog operation. He was a grizzled sixty, small and bent and wiry, the skin on his face and arms cured like old tobacco from a lifetime on the back of a tractor. Year in and year out he wore the same tattered Sears Roebuck overalls, the same patched and retreaded brown Montgomery Ward work boots. Indoors and out, winter and summer, he wore a cap set dead square on his head, always one he got free from a feed store or a farm implement dealer. Back when his wife was alive, she'd drag Earl to church once a year on Christmas, when he'd have to take off his cap and you could see the pale band of white skin the cap left across his forehead.

But he hadn't been to church in ten years, not since Alma had gone, driven to death, folks said, by stinginess and petty meanness. The old man now lived in the dilapidated clapboard farmhouse with his only offspring, Earl Peckwood, Jr. Folks liked to say they deserved each other; Junior Peckwood was bigger than his daddy, four inches and sixty pounds or so, but like him in looks and disposition. Same narrow face, same dark pig eyes, same streak of petty meanness. Same willingness to step over a pot of gold to pick up a penny.

The old men who liked to sit afternoons at the bar of the Railroad Hotel used to joke that old Earl Peckwood was like to live forever because he was too mean to give anybody the pleasure of seeing him in a casket and too cheap to pay for a funeral. So they were mildly surprised, if not much bereaved, when he was found one Tuesday afternoon ground to death by the steel auger in the bottom of a self-unloading grain wagon.

The wagon—the one the Action News lady in the city called the "Death Wagon"—was ordinary enough. It was old, the kind they don't make any more. Side walls nine feet high, thirty feet long, yellow paint faded and flaking, streaked and crusted in spots with rust, hitched to an

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ancient combine that somebody had tried to repaint maroon. A ladder leaned against the side of the wagon, and two men lounged beside it.

I pulled the patrol car slowly through the shambles of a farmyard—around the decaying hulks of cars and farm equipment, piles of old tires, stacks of scrap lumber, odd bits of metal, part rolls of rusted baling wire, and empty forty gallon pesticide drums—and stopped next to the wagon. All around was the unmistakable reek of ill-kept pigs. We got out.

"What happened?" asked Sheriff Stubbs.

"He must of fallen in, I guess," said the bigger of the two. You could tell he was Earl Peckwood's boy.

"Yeah," said the other, a kid named Raynell Doland who hung around with Junior. "We found him in there when we got back."

Sheriff Winifred Stubbs ran a hand through her short, graying hair. "You're the one who called in," she said to Doland.

"Yes, ma'am. From the house. We came back out here to wait for you."

"Did you see it happen?"

"No. It was like this when we got here."

She nodded at me. "You better take a look, A. P." I climbed up the side of the wagon, not an easy job for a man my size, careful not to touch the ladder that leaned against it. I looked inside.

"He's dead," I called down after a minute. "We're not going to need an ambulance." She nodded. I turned back to the wagon. What was inside wasn't pretty.

You may or may not know what a self-unloading grain wagon is. When you fill a wagon with grain, there are two main ways to get it out. Some kinds of wagons have doors on the bottom that open so that gravity pulls the grain out, like water running down a drain. The other kind—the self-unloading ones—let the farmer shoot the grain out the *side* of the wagon so it can be sent up a chute into a silo. The inside walls of Peckwood's wagon tapered down—something like a railroad coal car—to an open trench at the bottom that ran the length of the wagon. Inside the trench, running its full length, was a big steel auger that looked something like a corkscrew, but a corkscrew about two feet across. When the auger spun, it drove the grain out an opening in the back of the wagon, where another auger inside a round chute sent it up into the silo.

Inside the wagon was an inch or two of golden new winter

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wheat, much of it now stained dark red. Caught inside the heavy auger, rammed up tight against the back end of the wagon, was the mangled body of Earl Peckwood. He'd gone in head first and only about half the body had been pulled into the auger. But the rotating steel blade had done a job on the top part of the body. From my angle you couldn't even tell that there was a head, and most of the chest area was crushed. There was a trail of blood clotted in red-brown clumps along the bottom of the wagon. It occurred to me that the trail marked the body's path in the auger, carried along toward the exit port as if it had been so much grain. Maybe the worst thing about the sight was the way one of Earl's arms was sticking straight up in the air, palm out, like he was waving. The pale band of fish-white skin where a wristwatch had been didn't help.

My stomach felt queasy. I cut a fresh plug of tobacco and climbed down, and Sheriff Stubbs went up. She didn't stay long either.

When she got down, she looked closely at Doland. "Why did you call the sheriff's office and not the ambulance?"

Doland looked at Junior. Junior grimaced. "Wasn't no call for a ambulance. Wasn't no question he was dead. Right, Ray?"

"No, he was dead all right," said Doland.

"Those people," Junior went on, "they charge you an arm and a leg for the ambulance, then they charge you to take him into the hospital and tell you he's dead. He was dead. You could tell."

"You didn't call a doctor?"

Junior shrugged. "Wasn't nothing a doctor was gonna do for him, neither. I figure when someone's dead like that, you call the sheriff. So I told Ray to call you."

"I see." At this point an unmarked Chevy pulled up with two evidence technicians and a photographer from the state barracks over at Rome. They all wore neat J. C. Penney suits and quiet ties.

"What have we got?" said the chief tech, a balding, fair-skinned man named Costas.

"Man in the wagon there," said the sheriff, pointing.

"Accident?" said Costas.

She shrugged. "Don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" demanded Junior. "What else could it be?"

"It's just routine, Junior. Any time there's an accidental death without a witness, we have to investigate."

"You got it," said Costas. He climbed up and looked in. "Jesus," he said.

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I don't hold with blasphemy, but I could sympathize with how he felt. The three of them got to work.

We went back to Junior. His story was simple enough. He'd worked on the farm that morning. He left, around eleven thirty to run up to the Wal-Mart in Rome. He and his daddy had finished bringing in the winter wheat, but when Junior left, Earl still had to unload the last wagon. When Junior got to Rome, he stopped off to visit a woman he'd been seeing regularly, a divorcée named Dolores Cooper. That had been just about noon. She fixed him lunch, and they spent a few hours together at her house. Just being sociable, he said. About three thirty he called his friend Doland, who also lived in Rome, to invite him back to the house. Junior picked up Doland, and they went to the Wal-Mart together. They got back to the Peckwood place around a quarter to five, after having stopped for beer at the Party Barn out on 404. When they arrived, there was no sign of old Earl. They went looking for him and noticed the ladder against the side of the grain wagon.

"I figgered he was inside, workin' on it, and hadn't heard us," said Junior. "Daddy told me that the wagon hadn't been runnin' well, that after the wheat was in he was going to look at it. So I climbed up to see if he was there and . . ." He shook his head. "I told him lots of times that old wagon was dangerous, we ought to see about getting one of the new ones, the ones that ain't got that open auger. But Daddy, he was too stubborn, he said this one was still good."

"So then what did you do?" she asked.

"I asked Ray to climb up and look in. He did."

"I like to fainted," said Doland.

Junior nodded. "I told Ray we had to call somebody, so we went back to the house, and he called you all."

"Uh-huh," said Winnie. "Other than climbing up the ladder, did you touch anything?"

Junior shook his head. Raynell spoke up. "No, we didn't touch nothing. It's just like it was when we got here."

"You didn't turn anything off, for example?"

"Nope. We didn't touch nothing."

"Like the engine on the combine?"

"Nope."

"You last saw your father alive, then, at eleven thirty?"

"Yep."

"Was anyone with you?"

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"Nope." Junior took a sip of beer. " 'Course, Dad would of gone to lunch at noon. He always did. Noon to one."

"Where did he go?"

"Railroad Hotel. Went there every day since Mama died. I 'spect he was there today, too."

The medical examiner, Dr. Singhali, arrived. He was a cheerful moonfaced man who worked at the hospital over in Rome. He spent maybe ten minutes down in the wagon before he emerged, pulling off the latex gloves.

"Well?" said Winnie.

He shrugged. "Severe trauma to the head and upper torso. Probably caused by the machinery here. Head and shoulders went into the screw and were crushed against the side of the trench."

"You mean the body was crushed by the auger?"

"Yes."

"Is that all you can tell?"

"For now." She looked disappointed. He smiled. "Ah, sheriff, I have merely looked at the body. I have not done my examination, the autopsy. When a body is as badly mangled as this one, it could have been shot, stabbed, hanged, *and* poisoned, but I could not tell it without putting it on the table."

"Fair enough, doc. Can you tell when he died?"

Dr. Singhali shrugged again. "There is no rigor yet, but that does not tell us much. Neither does the temperature of the body, since it is lying on a metal surface in sunlight on a warm day, which would keep it heated and would delay the rigor. The blood is all coagulated, but it would be in this sunlight anyway. There is no way to be precise. At least three hours or so, I would guess, probably five or six. I would be surprised if he had been dead more than twelve hours. But not very surprised."

That would put it at no later than four, more likely one or two o'clock, maybe earlier. "Was he alive when he went in?" asked Winnie.

"Probably. If he had been dead, we would not expect to see so much blood."

"Does it look like an accident?"

"Ah." Again the shrug. "Accident is a legal concept, sheriff, not a medical one. When I complete my examination, I can tell you whether he was killed by the turning of that screw, but I cannot tell you how he came to be there."

"When can you do the autopsy?"

"Tomorrow morning, I think. I can probably have the results

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late tomorrow, or the day after."

"I'd appreciate them as soon as you can," she said.

The light had faded. It was past eight. The evidence techs were still working under lights they had rigged up. The body hadn't been removed yet; a wagon from the funeral home would be along in an hour or two, along with firemen who'd get the job of prying it out of the auger. Junior and Doland had gone back to the house after promising to stop by the jail the next afternoon to sign statements. Winnie and I stood in the gloom, leaning against the fender of the grain wagon.

"I hate these farm accidents," I said.

"Yes?" she said.

I pointed to the wagon. "This kind of equipment is dangerous. Every year we lose a couple of people, a few limbs to farm equipment. You'd think they could make it safer."

"You'd think so." She sounded abstracted. "You think it was an accident?"

"What else could it be? He was here alone."

"Junior Peckwood didn't seem too broken up."

"Old Earl was a hard man to love."

"What do you think about his not calling an ambulance?"

"Typical. I doubt he'd spend a nickel on an ambulance for himself, let alone his daddy."

She was quiet for a minute. Then she spoke. "You know, A. P., I was wondering."

"Yeah?"

"What powers the auger that turns in the bottom of the wagon?"

"This kind," I said, looking it over, "runs off the engine on the combine. Here, I'll show you." We walked to the front of the wagon, where it was attached to the back of the combine. "The engine power of the combine gets sent back through this thing here. You couple the connector on the combine to the connection on the front of the wagon up here. See?"

"Uh-huh."

"Inside the wagon there's a transmission that takes the power from the combine engine and turns the auger in the wagon. See this lever here? Pull it up and it's in neutral, the auger doesn't spin. Push it down, it's like putting your car in gear, it makes the auger spin."

The lever was down. "So it's in gear now?" she asked.

"Yep. You turn on the combine engine, it'd start spinning."

"So . . . the combine engine has to be running for the auger to spin?"

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"That's right, on this kind."

"When Junior and Doland got here, the auger wasn't turning and the engine wasn't running."

I thought about that for a minute. "Well, they usually have a safety device on them so that when anything jams the auger, it shuts off." I took off the big Smokey Bear hat and scratched my head. " 'Course, then it's supposed to stop before it grinds a man up." I thought a bit more. "A lot of these old farmers, though, they disconnect the safety device. Otherwise they're always having to stop anytime there's a clog, like when the wheat is too wet or something. Earl might have disconnected his."

She looked interested. "Can we tell if the safety device was disconnected?"

"Maybe." I went over to the patrol car and pulled out a box of tools. Taking off my Sam Browne belt, I got down under the body of the wagon. I huffed and puffed some. I've put on a few pounds in the last few years. Winnie got down to hold the flashlight.

It took a few minutes to pull the casing off the wagon's gearbox. The gears inside were worn and caked with dirt and debris.

"Well?" she asked.

"Look at this here. See this little gear?" I pointed to a cylinder with notched ends.

"Uh-huh."

"It sits on the shaft, see? When the auger is spinning, this gear spins at the same speed as the auger shaft. When the auger hits any resistance, the shaft slows down a little bit, but this gear keeps spinning at the same speed. That makes it move back along the shaft, like this." I demonstrated. "When it gets forced back, it's supposed to hit a pin that moves this armature here. That pops the clutch back to neutral."

"I don't see any pin."

I pursed my lips. "Right. No pin. It should have been right here." I pointed. "Could have just broken off, or somebody could have knocked it off."

"So someone might have deliberately disabled the safety device?"

"Yep. Either Earl or somebody else. Like I said, a lot of these old farmers do it."

We climbed out. I worked a new plug into my cheek. "Let me make sure I understand this," she said. "The auger was in gear, and the safety mechanism was disabled. The combine engine has to be running for the auger to spin, but the engine wasn't running when Junior and Doland got here."

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"Yep."

"So how did the combine engine get turned off?"

I shrugged. "Couple of ways. It might have run out of gas and stopped. It might have stalled if the auger got jammed. I mean, if the clutch couldn't pop over to neutral but the auger couldn't spin, it might have stalled the engine. Like if your car wheels can't move and you pop the car into gear with the engine running. It would stall your engine. Or maybe the engine doesn't run too well, and just stalls on its own sometimes." I spat thoughtfully.

"Or somebody might have turned it off."

"That too."

Winnie walked over to the front of the combine and climbed in the cab. I hoisted myself up into the door to watch. The combine had a key ignition, with a starter button next to it. The key was there on a ring with other keys, turned on. That didn't mean anything, of course. If someone had turned the engine off, they could turn the key back to on without starting it again. You had to push the starter button. The gas gauge read half a tank.

"It didn't run out of gas," she said. "How can we tell if the engine stalled because of a jam?"

"Only way I know is to start it up."

She thought a minute. "I guess we'll have to."

I accidentally swallowed some tobacco juice. "Have to what?"

"Start it up."

"With the body in it?"

"If we take the body out," she said, "we can't tell if it was jammed."

That was true enough, but I didn't much care for the idea. I'm not in general an imaginative man, but I could see Earl Peckwood waving at me when that auger started up again.

We climbed down, and Winnie went over to Costas. "You guys finished with the body and the inside of the wagon?"

"Yeah, for now," said Costas. "We're gonna have to do an inventory of the body when they pull it out, that's all."

"You have all the photographs you need?"

"Yeah."

"Is it going to foul you up if I turn the auger on again for a minute?"

He looked surprised. "Turn the auger on? With him in it?"

"Yes." She explained.

He looked dubious. "You got any reason to think it wasn't a farm accident?"

"Well—not really. But we've got to check out the possibilities. Is it going to cause any problem for your investigation?"

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He thought about it for a moment. "I guess not," he said.

"Fine." She went back to the wagon. I was already halfway up the ladder.

"Hey, A. P.," she called, "you start the combine, and *I'll* watch the auger."

I frowned. I admit that I had to adjust some of my thinking when the voters decided to elect a woman sheriff. And I'll concede that if Deborah could be a judge of Israel, there's no good reason why Winnie Stubbs couldn't be sheriff of De Soto County. But you'll never convince me that looking at corpses being ground up by augers is proper work for a woman. "I'm already up here, sheriff," I said. "You just push the starter button, and we'll see what happens."

She shrugged and got into the cab. The evidence techs stopped to watch.

"Okay," I yelled. She hit the button, pushing it with the back of a pencil. The engine fired right up. It ran for a minute. "Okay, off!"

She turned the key off, and the engine stopped. She climbed down and met me at the bottom of the ladder.

"Well?" she asked.

"It turned just fine." I spat, long and far. "The way the body is now, there's sort of—sort of *grooves* where the auger spins. So it turns pretty free."

She looked at me. "So it didn't jam, then."

I shrugged. "Doesn't look like it."

"So someone turned the engine off."

"Well, it does seem like a possibility."

We were thinking about it when the Action News people showed up and we had to spend the next hour or two trying not to say anything stupid and trying to keep them from messing things up.

The first thing next morning Winnie called Joe Graves, a cousin of hers who has the implement dealership in Corinth, and asked him to go out to Peckwood's and see if there were any problems with the engine on the combine that would cause it to stall. He agreed.

We then took my patrol car over to Rome to see Dolores Cooper. The address Junior gave us was on a narrow street of patched and broken asphalt, without curbs. The houses were small and wooden, close together and treeless. Number 447 was like the rest, flaking paint, weathered rockers on the porch, badly overgrown azaleas.

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Winnie knocked at the door. She was wearing black toreador pants with a white shirt and a purple sort of blazer. She once told me she didn't like a uniform because it made her rear end look too big.

We heard scuffling sounds, then the door opened a crack. I couldn't see inside. "Yes?" said a woman's voice.

There was a crash inside. "Jason!" yelled the voice. "Stop that!" There was another crash.

"Mrs. Cooper?" asked Winnie.

"Yeah. Look, if you're selling something, I got to tell you I ain't interested right now."

"No, I'm not." Winnie fumbled in her handbag and pulled out her wallet with her badge. The door opened wide. "I'm Sheriff Stubbs from over in De Soto County. This is Chief Deputy Snow."

"Oh," said Dolores. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you was the Mary Kay lady. They're always coming around here. Come on in."

Dolores Cooper turned out to be a woman in her mid-twenties, full-bodied, with big soft eyes and rich-looking brown hair. She wore no makeup, and her housedress clung to her. She was carrying a two-year-old.

We sat in the living room. It was small and dark, with cheap, battered furnishings. It smelled like cigarettes and old milk. The floor was covered with toys. A pudgy kid with dark hair and a wet mouth was banging a plastic truck with a wooden mallet. "Jason, stop that!" said Dolores. He kept hammering away. She looked helplessly at us.

"A very sturdy young man," said Winnie. "He looks about six."

Dolores beamed. "No, he's only four. Almost five."

"Really?" Winnie smiled admiringly. "He's so big for his age."

"Yes, he is. He's a handful, too, I can tell you. This one here is Jonah, he's almost two. Say hello to the nice people, Jonah." The child stared vacantly and blew a little bubble of spit. "Uh, would you like some coffee or somethin'?"

"No. Thanks very much. We came to ask you about Earl Peckwood, Jr. He said he was with you yesterday."

Dolores pushed her hair back. "Yes, he was. He got here around noon. I had the kids packed up over to my sister's."

"Does he come by here often?"

She reddened a little. "Sometimes."

"I'm sorry to ask this, but what's the relationship between you and Junior?"

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She reddened even more. "Oh, good friends. We been going together for a while, maybe a year or so. Since I got divorced, he's been real good to me. He's real fond of the little ones."

I tried to picture Junior Peckwood romping with little Jason and Jonah. I couldn't. Winnie continued smoothly, "Does he often come by in the daytime?"

"Sometimes, if I can get my sister to take the kids. He takes me out sometimes, evenin's, but mostly we just stay here. He likes home cooking."

I'll bet he does, I thought.

"He got here at what time?"

"About five minutes to noon. I know that 'cause I usually watch *All My Children* at noon, and he got here a little before that."

"Did you watch the program?"

"No. I made lunch for him, then we just sort of talked for a while."

"How long was he here?"

"Till about three thirty. He asked to use the phone, called up Raynell Doland from here. Then he left to go to the Wal-Mart."

"Did Junior ever talk about his father?"

"Not usually."

"Sometimes?"

"Well, yeah."

"What did he say about him?"

"Nothing much. How he was a farmer, how many acres he got, things like that. You sure you all wouldn't like some coffee? I've got some tea, too. Or a Pepsi."

"No, thank you. Did he ever talk about what he would inherit if his father died?"

"Jason!" screeched Dolores. "Take that out of your mouth right now!" The child was sucking on a red block. He ignored the interruption.

"Mrs. Cooper, did he ever talk about what would happen if his father died?"

"No. Never."

"So Junior is covered from noon to the time the body was found," I said as we drove away. "More like eleven forty, since it would take at least twenty minutes to get to Rome from Peckwood's place."

"Yes," said Winnie.

I shook my head. "She didn't look too comfortable, though."

"No."

"Seem nervous to you?"

"Yes." Winnie was obviously thinking about something else.

"Where to now?" I asked.

She looked at her watch. "The Railroad Hotel. We need to see if Earl had lunch there."

The Railroad Hotel was the

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biggest building in the hamlet of Crete. That itself was not much of a distinction, Crete being not much more than a wide spot in the road where the old Missouri, Kansas & Texas tracks crossed Route 21. But underneath the beer signs and the siding they put on in the sixties, you could still see traces of the Grand Hotel where oldtime railroad men from the M.K.T.—the old Katy Line—would drink good Missouri corn and talk about William Jennings Bryan and free silver.

May Elvin, a broad genial woman who didn't take any nonsense and whose daily specials were the best eating values in the county, owned the hotel.

"Earl Peckwood?" she said. "Shame about him. Not that he'll be missed much around here, you understand."

"No?" said Winnie.

"No. In ten years the man never left a tip and never ordered anything except the special. We don't make money on the food."

"Did he come to lunch yesterday?" asked Winnie.

"Sure. Every day, like clockwork. Got here about ten after twelve, left a little before one."

"You're sure he was here yesterday?"

"He was always here."

"But are you certain he was here yesterday?"

"Sure. He was talking with Sonny Bayles and Bob Sweeney. Sonny's over there in the booth. They were kidding him."

"About what?"

"Oh, about how stylish he was. He was wearing this new cap, purple it was with gold letters. Had those things on the bill, you know, gold stuff?"

"Scrambled eggs?" I said.

"Yeah. That's what they call it. Like a general or something. Pretty jazzy for a shabby old miser like him. 'Course, it was for some new fertilizer or something. He got it from a feed store, as usual. Anyway, there he was in them awful overalls and this purple cap. The guys thought it was funny."

"What time did he leave?"

"Oh, a little before one. He had the liver and onions with a glass of water, and I know he was talking about hog prices some with Sonny. So he couldn't of left before a quarter to one, anyway."

Sonny Bayles confirmed the story. "No, that old rascal was here, all right. Complaining as usual."

"About what?"

"The usual. Hog prices, the government, May's food. I'm sorry, I know you're not s'posed to speak ill of the dead, but he

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got what he deserved in the end."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, he was using that old wagon that any fool could tell was dangerous as hell. He was too cheap to get a new one, or even put a guard over the auger. That's what killed him. Cheapness."

The rest of that day and all of Thursday was routine. Deputies went from farm to farm, trying to find out if anyone had been at Earl's place between the time he left the Railroad Hotel and the time he was found. They drew a blank. There was no sign that anyone except Earl and Junior had been at Peckwood's farm that day. As for Junior, a clerk at the Wal-Mart confirmed that Junior and Raynell Doland had been there that afternoon. Neighbors of Dolores Cooper couldn't recall seeing Junior's pickup in front of her house, but they couldn't recall *not* seeing it, either. Doland's mother confirmed the call that Junior made to her son. Finally, we learned that Earl's estate would probably amount to something like eight hundred thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in De Soto County, and that Junior as the only offspring would inherit.

Joe Graves reported that the old combine's engine seemed fine; it had no problem with stalling.

Around noon Thursday Dr. Singhali called to say the autopsy was done and the report would be coming. "As I told you at the site," he said, "the body suffered severe trauma to the head, chest, right arm, and upper abdomen. The head and the right side in particular were crushed. There were no signs of any wounds to the body that could not have been inflicted by the screw. No stabs or gunshots or anything like that." He paused, and we could hear him fumbling with his notes. "He was not drunk. Often in cases like this the individual has been drinking or taking some sort of drug. But there was no alcohol in his blood. There were no tranquilizers or other drugs, none of the substances that might suggest he was unconscious when he fell in. The heart appeared to be normal for a man his age, no sign of a heart attack. The head was in bad shape, but there was no obvious sign that he passed out from a stroke or anything like that."

"So what killed him?"

"As far as I can tell, the auger. He seems to have been a healthy man at the time he landed on it."

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"Can you tell if he fell or was pushed?"

"Sorry. The apparent cause of death was that screw. I don't know how he got there."

"Could someone have knocked him out and then pushed him into the auger?"

"Not with drugs. We found no drugs."

"How about a blow to the head?"

He thought for a moment. "I suppose so. The head was so damaged that I doubt it would be possible to distinguish such a blow from the damage that was done later."

"What about the time of death?"

"Probably not more than half an hour after he ate lunch, based on the contents of the stomach. He'd eaten liver and onions."

"Right. He finished eating about twelve forty-five or so."

"That would put the time of death at one fifteen, one thirty, I would say."

Winnie sighed. "Thanks, doc. We appreciate the speed."

"No problem." He hung up.

Late that afternoon, Winnie and I were sitting in her office at the jail in Corinth, the county seat. The jail is one story brick, built back when Andy Jackson was president. The two cells were empty, as usual. The windows were open, the azaleas rioting outside in reds and pinks and purples. The ceiling fan fluttered the FBI Wanted posters on the old corkboard.

"Looks like everything checks out," I said.

"Yes," said Winnie.

"You don't sound convinced."

"I don't know, A. P., but it bothers me. Junior Peckwood is inheriting a lot of money, and it's awfully convenient that he happened to go to the Wal-Mart the day his daddy was killed. It doesn't smell right." She shook her head.

It didn't smell good to me, either, but I put that down to dislike of Junior Peckwood. "Maybe the report from the state boys will have something," I said.

A trooper brought the report from the evidence techs early the next morning. We sat in Winnie's office to go over them in detail. I wasn't impressed.

A track down the side of the wagon suggested that the body slid head first to the bottom. You could see the track plainly in one of the photos. The sliding was confirmed by the fact that the front of Earl's overalls had grain residue matching that on the sides of the wagon. There

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was grain residue on the toes of the boots but none on his hands.

There were no marks on the body inconsistent with its simply having fallen into the auger. The old overalls were so crusted and gritty that they'd given up looking for anything unusual, like fibers. There had been soil, pig manure, wheat grains, and grass on the boots and also on the ladder.

The cab of the combine had been filthy, and it had been difficult to get prints from the dusty surfaces, but the only fingerprints found in the cab were Earl's and Junior's. Junior's were on file from an old drunk and disorderly charge he'd had up in Steuben County. The key was too smudged to tell anything.

There was more. All of it technical, all of it essentially negative: no unusual circumstances, no unusual substances, no sign of anyone at the site other than Earl and Junior.

At the back of the report was a list of Earl Peckwood's personal belongings that had been found on the body or at the scene. Overalls, T-shirt, undershorts, one pair of socks, one pair of boots. A wallet in the pocket with some miscellaneous personal receipts and an oil company credit card. No cash. No coins. A pocket knife with a cracked handle, several yards of string, two books of matches from the Railroad Hotel, seven roofing nails, and a pencil stub.

It took two hours to wade through the materials. From the walls, old prints of Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, and Harry Truman watched us go back and forth, from text to photographs, trying to piece together what happened. In the end, Winnie tossed a handful of papers onto the desk. "Phew!" she said. We sat thinking for several minutes. Finally she spoke.

"Let's think this through," she said. "Earl went into the auger alive. There are three possibilities. First, he fell in accidentally. Second, he was pushed in. And third, he jumped in deliberately."

"I can't see picking that way to commit suicide," I said.

"No. Which leaves us with accident or murder. He clearly slid down the side of the wagon. What facts do we have to suggest that it wasn't an accident? First, it would have required a very awkward balancing act for him to have fallen into the wagon. It's impossible to fall over a wall like that unless you're standing near the very top of the ladder and leaning out over the side."

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"He could have been doing that."

"Yes, but why? Why would he be leaning well out over the side wall above a spinning auger?"

"Maybe he was reaching for something."

"What?"

She had me there. "I don't know. Maybe some grain was sticking to the side."

"Next," she said, "the fact that he didn't struggle on the way down, didn't scrabble to keep himself from falling in. There was no grain residue on his hands."

"He might have been too startled to react."

"Possibly, but Earl was a pretty wiry old man, and you'd expect him to have tried to stop himself from going in. The third significant fact is that someone turned off the combine."

"*If* they turned it off. If someone was trying to make it look like an accident, why would they turn the combine off?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

"There are other facts that support the idea it was an accident." I glanced at the report. "There were soil, pig manure, wheat grains, and grass on the ladder and on Earl's boots. That suggests he climbed up himself."

She waved a hand. "It's a hog and grain operation. I suspect there's probably soil, manure, grain, and grass on everything at Peckwood's."

"Maybe. But the only fingerprints were Earl's and Junior's, and we can't show that Junior was there."

"True. There's no sign of anyone except Earl and Junior. If it *was* murder, it's pretty much got to be Junior."

"But we can't show he was there."

"No," she said. A little wistfully, maybe.

"And unless we can show he was there, we have an accident," I said. She didn't answer. After a while, I stood up and stretched. "Maybe I'd better get out on patrol for a while," I said, "clear my mind."

"Yes," she said absently.

I hitched up my belt and walked out, leaving her staring at the big brass spittoon in the corner. A moment later I went back in. She looked up.

"Forgot something," I said, taking the big Smokey Bear hat off the coatrack and putting it on.

Something clicked in her eyes. "Hold it!" she said. "Don't go anywhere."

"Okay," I said.

Her mind was obviously working feverishly. Suddenly she grinned. "I've got it," she

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said. "Come on, we're going to get a search warrant."

Junior Peckwood sat in a shabby wing chair in the living room of the farmhouse, looking sullen. I had been with him for an hour while Winnie and two other deputies searched the place.

"I don't know what you all are doing," said Junior. "Man's father dies, you treat him like a criminal."

"Won't take long," I said.

As if on cue, the door opened and Winnie came in with the deputies. She nodded to me and sat down on the sofa across from Junior. I moved my chair closer to him.

"Well, Junior," said Winnie, "do you want to tell us what really happened?"

He looked from face to face. "Hey, I already told you what I know. I wasn't here."

"Yes, you were. After lunch."

"I was in Rome after lunch."

"No. You were here. Your father had finished the wheat harvesting. The wagon was empty. He came back from lunch. You were here. You hit him, knocked him out. Maybe with your fist, you're big enough. Maybe with something else. In any event, you put the ladder up against the side of the wagon and turned on the auger. You carried your father up the ladder; that wouldn't be too difficult for you. Then you slid him down the side into the auger. Head first. You waited until he was clearly dead, then you climbed down and turned off the combine. You turned the key back on to make it look like it had stalled."

Junior was scornful. "That's a lie. I was with Dolores Cooper in Rome. You can't prove this."

Winnie shook her head. "Turning off the combine was a mistake. I admit I couldn't imagine why you'd done it. But that was before I realized what else you had done. Before you threw your father into the auger, you went through his pockets. You took the money from the wallet. Even the change. You didn't want to lose a nickel."

Junior didn't say anything. She went on. "Then you saw the wristwatch. It was a pretty good wristwatch, not fancy but it ran." Winnie held up a plastic bag. "This is it. You couldn't bear to see a good watch maybe get ground up. So you took it off your father's wrist. I saw it was missing the first moment I saw the body, but I didn't think about it. We found it in one of your drawers upstairs. We'll have to check it for fingerprints, but you might not have been very careful."

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I got up and moved behind Junior's chair. His eyes moved from deputy to deputy. He licked his lips nervously. "Dad gimme that watch," he said thickly.

"No, your father wore a watch. I'm sure we'll be able to show he was wearing one at the hotel at lunch on Tuesday, and he wasn't when we found him. There's no other watch in the house. Except the digital thing you're wearing now.

"And then there's the cap. Your father always wore a cap. Everybody knew that. But there wasn't one around when he was pulled out of the auger. The state evidence people didn't find one at the site. When you got ready to throw your father in the wagon, you saw that new cap your father had gotten from the feed store. You thought it was a shame to waste it, getting it all bloody and mangled. So you took the cap before you shoved him in." Winnie took the cap out of her bag. Vivid purple, with "Commando Feeds" in big gold letters. "We found it in your closet. With luck, maybe the evidence guys at Rome can find your daddy's hair on it. Or even a mark where he was hit."

"It's a lie," said Junior. He started to come up out of the chair. "A goddamned lie!"

He sat down very suddenly when I clamped my hand on his shoulder and shoved. "Easy, boy," I said. "No call to use language like that. Try to sit quiet."

Winnie sighed. "I suppose you should read him his rights, A. P."

"I suppose so."

It didn't take Dolores Cooper long to recant once she learned she might be charged as an accessory if she didn't. She put it all down in a signed statement. Junior had gotten there about two thirty. He'd promised to marry her when he could afford to. She loved him. He was real good with little Jason and Jonah.

Then a lawyer explained to Junior that if he had gotten into a fight with his father and killed him in a burst of anger, he would be facing second degree murder, maybe only manslaughter. But if he'd *planned* to murder his father—which the State of Missouri was perfectly willing to try to prove—it was going to be capital murder. We still have the death penalty in Missouri. Junior eventually admitted to killing Earl accidentally and then putting him in the auger to cover it up. We'll see whether a jury buys that story.

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A day or so later Winnie and I were sitting in her office.

"Well, I guess that's that," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"One thing I don't understand, though."

"What?"

"Why on earth did he turn off the combine? Seems to me that was stupid, even for a Peckwood."

Winnie shrugged. "Same reason he took the money and the watch and the cap."

"Yeah?"

She grinned at me. "He didn't want to waste the gasoline."

I thought about it for a while. "No kidding?"

"No."

I shook my head. "Like father, like son," I said.

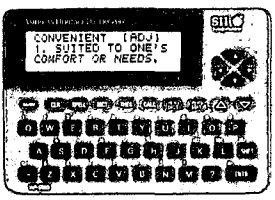
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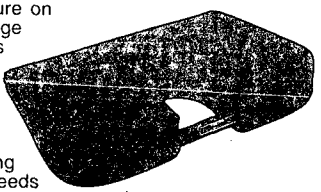


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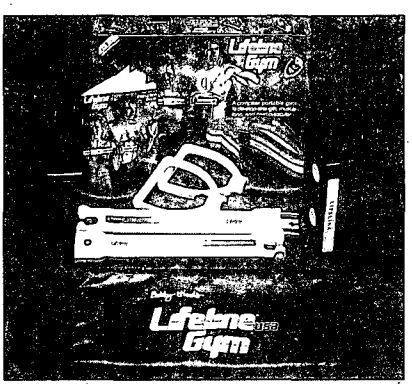
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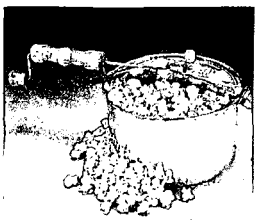


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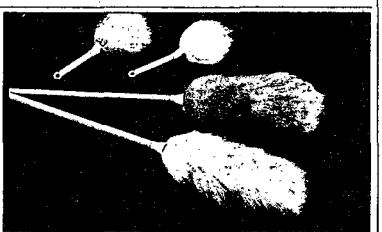


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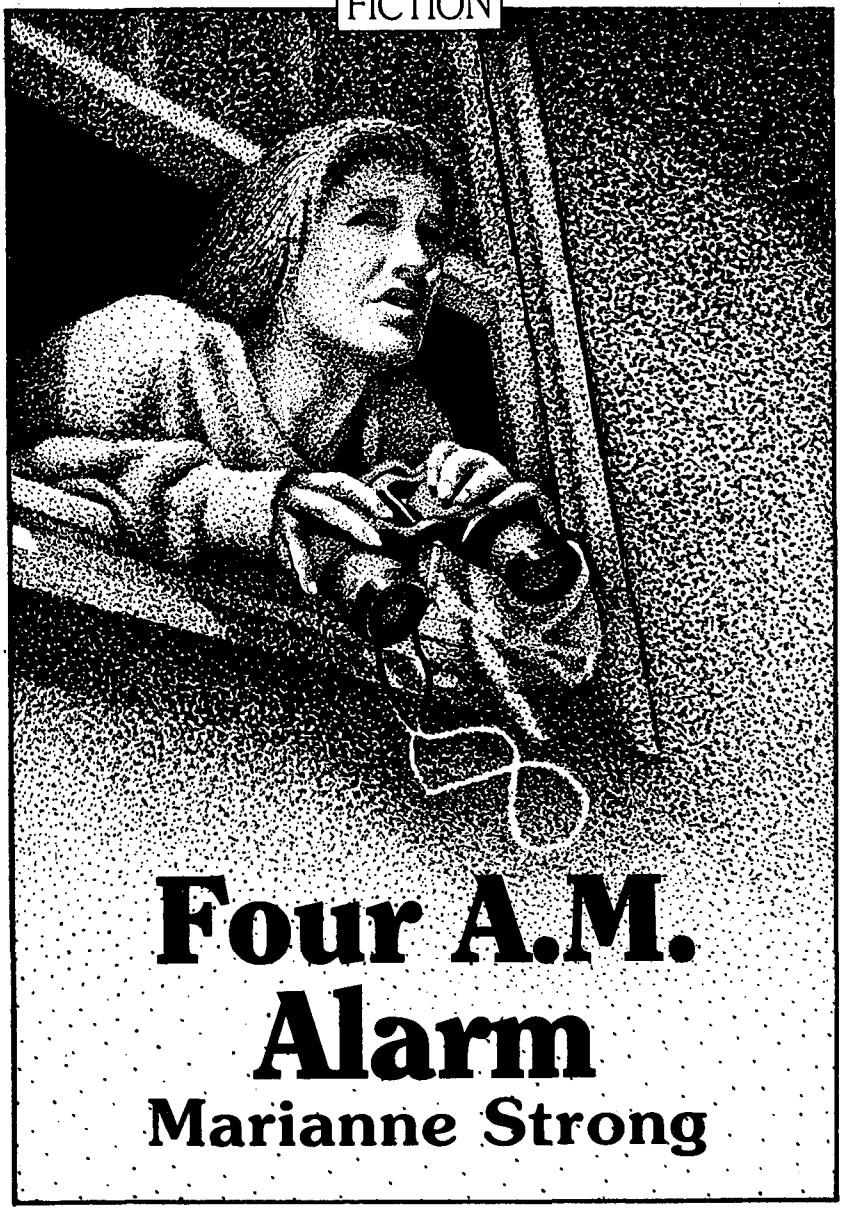
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FICTION



Four A.M. Alarm

Marianne Strong

Illustration by Mark Penta

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Outside the open second story window of the bedroom, the still night magnified the sounds of South Carolina's Edisto Island.

It was Wednesday night, and Patricia Callens lay awake listening. Pat liked islands. They had a kind of independent spirit that came from battling the sea or whatever water threatened to wash them away. For the last two summers, she'd wandered the island's beaches and woods, prowling among its palmettos and pines and hundred-year-old live oaks.

She'd learned a few words of the Gullah language, taken down a few herb remedies for fevers, and found gravestones of former slaves, gravestones facing the sea so the deceased could make their way back to Africa.

Edisto had provided her with good therapy, nice, quiet therapy, but she didn't need any more peace. She wanted people and action again. And it looked as if she was going to get it.

Something strange was going on outside her seaside bungalow, and whatever it was had brought Pat out of the doldrums and into that sense of heightened expectation that she liked so well.

Still, she was an intruder on Edisto, a summer renter, a northern newcomer among those whose ancestors had paid for Edisto with backbreaking labor and a fierce fight for their own Gullah culture and identity. It could prove hard to find out what was going on.

Now beneath her window an animal rustled by. Too loud for one of the island's wild turkeys. Besides, wild turkeys weren't nocturnal.

The rustling began again, too loud for the normally cautious opossum. More like a raccoon foraging, boldly uncaring who heard. Patricia rather liked the raccoons.

She stared at the blue numbers on her radio alarm clock. One digit finally changed: three fifty-three to three fifty-four.

Outside, the tough spears of a palmetto clicked and scratched in the light wind.

Pat catalogued that sound, relegating it to some remote cell in her mind, and listened again. Over the last three weeks, her peaceful Edisto nights had been disturbed by a scream three times. Each time, the scream had come at just about four in the morning, once on a Wednesday, and twice on Thursdays.

Pat had informed the local sheriff, but he hadn't shown much interest in what sounded to him like a domestic problem among some summer renters,

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so that left Pat to find out for herself what the hell was going on. It felt nice to have a mission. She was glad she'd decided to return to Edisto again this summer.

Tonight was the first night on the job. Who on this forested sea island of native Gullah people, and a summer population of several hundred, including Pat, would peal out high screams at four in the morning?

Pat couldn't even tell if the screamer was male or female. Female, she thought. The screams were pitched at a pretty high octave. But then, three years ago, when she had smacked her fist into her handsome husband's nose for philandering with a coed, he'd let out a high howl worthy of Renata Tebaldi. It wasn't the philandering that had bothered Pat. She'd suspected the extracurricular activity for months anyway and had made an appointment with a lawyer. It wasn't even that the coed was one of her former students. After all, Greg's own criminal procedure classes were populated largely by male students, offering him a limited choice for his activities. What ticked her off most was that the coed and Greg had used her office for their assignation. During Pat's class on English romantic poetry. That hurt.

Edisto had been a nice place to heal for the last two summers. Pat's place sat on the upper part of a horseshoe curve in the road. Across the road, a sandy field of palmettos sloped down to bayberries at the edge of the brackish channel whose waters lapped lazily against the shore.

Now someone was shattering the peace. By rights, Pat thought, she ought to resent it. But she felt that sense of excitement she'd felt ten years ago in tackling a potentially dangerous task when she'd last worked as a private eye, even during routine assignments like searching files for lost relatives or trailing unfaithful husbands. You'd have thought she'd have taken a lesson for her personal life from those days, but Greg had had big shoulders and slim hips. He'd looked great in his policeman's uniform, a nice contrast to all those bookish English professors she worked with.

Pat looked at the clock again. Three fifty-six. Tonight she'd at least pinpoint the direction from which those screams came. Then she could start investigating.

People had had plenty to scream about on this island. Slavers had dragged men and

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women from their villages in Sierra Leone and sold them in Charleston to the rice plantation owners of Edisto. In the marshy lands of Edisto, battling sand fleas, mosquitoes, and disease, the slaves had dug the channels that irrigated the land. Then, at the end of the Civil War, the plantation owners had fled before Grant's armies, abandoning their slaves. The Gullah people had managed to survive there, keeping their culture and their lands. Now Northerners were invading, building golf courses and slick hotels. Edisto had been spared the fate of Hilton Head so far, but developers looked lean and hungry at mention of the island.

Pat squirmed a little. She was one of those Northerners, after all, escaping traffic, crime, six-lane beltways, and the routine of papers and students and department meetings back home in Baltimore.

By the end of each spring semester, Pat wanted to shove a sponge down the throat of the next colleague who pontificated on literature as political tract and not art. By that time she'd even lost sympathy with the feminist critics who asked if Shakespeare were a male chauvinist pig for having Desdemona with her dying breath deny that Othello had smothered her with that damned pillow. When her colleagues argued over what Shakespeare had intended that scene to mean and whether anyone could know what he intended, she wanted to yell that Desdemona was a simp, Othello was a thug, and her colleagues were asses. By the end of the semester, Pat always had a profound sense of unreality. Words were only squibbles on deconstructed wood, known as paper to the world outside literary theory.

Here on Edisto the grey weathered boards of her bungalow were real, the tides actually left visible marks in the gritty sand, the black-backed gulls bit with gusto into the soft bellies of the clams, and some real human being screamed. Someone near enough to the bungalow for Pat to hear the scream.

She glanced again at the blue numbers: four o'clock. Perhaps the scream would not come tonight.

She flexed her shoulders and pulled her binoculars half an inch closer. They sat only an inch from the rim of the night table now. She'd been edging them closer since three even though she didn't really expect to see anything tonight.

She had only two neighbors nearby. Down the clay dirt road

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a short way at the vertex of the horseshoe curve, facing the Atlantic, stood a green-shingled cottage with two small barns and a sturdy dock. Its tenant was a man. Last week, traveling over sixty miles an hour on Edisto's narrow Route 174, he'd almost run Pat down. She'd caught a glimpse of burly shoulders, a large head in a wide-brimmed tan hat, and a jaw that must have measured seven inches.

If she got over to Jimbo's Groceries and Supplies today, she could pick up the island gossip on him.

The second new neighbor was a woman. She'd moved into the white clapboard farmhouse farther inland and to the left of the hulk's cottage. The farmhouse sat on the inside of the horseshoe road, almost directly across from Pat's place. Its property stretched across the road and down to the bay, prime shoreline property lusted after by several developers.

Pat had seen the woman once, on the beach early in the morning. A tall figure with black slacks and black shirt fluttering about her slim hips, the woman had smiled but had not slackened her pace to speak.

Pat had stared. The woman had a face that could have belonged to the Queen of Sheba. Solomon would have traded all nine hundred wives for her. Her skin was a golden brown, like oak leaves in late fall, and her eyes a dark brown. Big, too. Pat had tried everything to make her own blue deepset eyes look bigger, but her mascara always smudged and false eyelashes just looked like spiders on her. Besides, they tended to knock against her brow ridge and loosen. In class once, one fell onto a text of Wordsworth. A poem about a simple, natural girl named Lucy. Pat had burst out laughing, dismissed class, and pasted the eyelashes onto a picture of Wordsworth in the English faculty lounge.

Her neighbor had no need for false eyelashes. Or for the blue shutters on her cottage. The Gullah people painted shutters blue to ward off evil spirits. But maybe the Queen of Sheba was trying to ward off the hulk from the green-shingled cottage.

Pat counted back three and a half weeks and nodded. The queen and the hulk had moved in within two weeks of each other. She couldn't remember who'd come to Edisto first. But the screams had started after both of them had arrived.

She looked at the clock: four past four.

She was beginning to tire. She wasn't used to surveillance any more.

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Then it sounded. A high long scream, a wail more than a scream.

With the second wail, Pat leapt out of bed, grabbed the binoculars she'd placed on her nightstand, and scanned the trees and brush between her property and the woman's. Nothing moved except the Spanish moss swaying slightly on the branches of the live oaks scattered through the inner part of the horseshoe.

The scream sounded again, then faded. Pat knew it would not come again. Three screams were all that ever sounded.

But now she knew where to look. The scream had come from the direction of the bay, nearer the queen's yard than the hulk's dock.

At nine the next morning, Pat pulled her jeep into the dirt parking lot of Jimbo's Groceries and Supplies. She wanted some vegetables, some fruit, some kerosene for the still cool evenings, and some information. Jimbo stocked plenty of the last item.

Inside, Jimbo was emptying a new supply of Georgia peanuts into a barrel. Jimbo was from Savannah. He catered to Edisto's summer people, and supported the building of every new bridge and highway that would bring tourists to his place. Pat had once considered telling him that Piggly Wiggly was thinking of moving into this part of the island, but the pain at the thought of a supermarket on this spot outweighed the pleasure of seeing Jimbo squirm.

"Mornin', Pat," he greeted her heartily. Jimbo's enthusiasm for liberal views on newcomers and summer folk mirrored his sales figures. The bigger the figures, the more liberal and enthusiastic he became. "Got in that funny bread you ordered."

"Wheat bread."

"No good for you. Too hard by half. You oughtta use some nice soft bread that'll take it easy on your insides. I don't hold with all these newfangled foods. You don't know what they'll find out about them twenty years from now. Oh yeah, I got in that goat stuff, too."

"Yogurt."

"Whatever. I'll dig it out soon's I finish unloadin' these peanuts." Jimbo continued to dump peanuts out of a burlap bag, his talk about the latest plans of the developers for condominiums running about as fast as the peanuts. "Got one measly hotel on Edisto." Jimbo needed to voice this complaint in the mornings the way people needed a cup of coffee to get started. "We need some of them

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nice condominiums." He gave every syllable an accent. "Spruce up this island some."

"Yeah," Pat said. She'd given up arguing with him.

"You wouldn't have to stay in some beat-up old bungalow."

"Yeah." Pat had told Jimbo twenty times that she loved the beat-up old bungalow she rented, but he hadn't heard. He continued to insist that she'd love a condominium, aware, no doubt, that renters like Pat allowed Gullah families to pay the high taxes on their land and avoid having to sell out to developers. Pat had decided last year that no matter what the price, she'd rent the bungalow every damn year till she died to keep it in the Samuels family. Small enough payback to Edisto for the escape it provided her.

The last bag of peanuts emptied, Jimbo dusted off his jeans, wiped his hands in his thick red-blond hair, and headed for his storage room, stopping on the way to slap a box of black licorice sticks onto a shelf.

Pat drummed her fingers on the counter in front of her. She was back on the trail now, and anxious. The pursuit had already raised her blood pressure and her pulse. The adrenaline felt good.

Jimbo returned with bread and yogurt stacked in a box with "Hassel's Fireworks" printed on the front.

"Any news on the new renters?" Pat asked while Jimbo rang up her bill.

"Well now, the lady's a looker. Kinda weird, though. She came on in here about two weeks ago. Had herself all wrapped up in black and didn't say much. Bought, let's see now, bought some bread, the good stuff, some potatoes, some rice. No meat, though. Hope she ain't one of them vegetarians. She's a goodlookin' one, but she won't be for long with no meat in her."

"Where's she from?"

"Right here on Edisto, I hear. Lives up north now. I asked where, but she didn't say. I took notice of her license plate, though. Delaware. I've never been there. Small place, I understand."

"Anything else about her?"

"Yeah. She put in an order for some chemicals. I don't order stuff like that every day, except for lye and maybe some bug sprays."

"What kind of chemicals?"

Jimbo turned around and reached up to a shelf to shove aside a stack of baskets, exquisitely woven of beige sweetgrass with dark pine straw for accent. "Tourists like these things," he remarked of the island women's art. He pulled

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out a bottle. "Here it is. Rhodinal," he said, accenting every syllable. "Now I ask, what's a lady want with stuff like that?"

Pat shrugged. "I wonder." She knew rhodinal was used to develop film, but she'd learned years ago to ask and not answer questions. So the Queen of Sheba was developing photos. But of what? And what could photos have to do with screams?

"Yeah," Jimbo said. "Weird, like I said."

"What about the other renter? The man who took the old Dresser place."

"He's a short fella. Balding. He's got a kinda mushed up nose and small eyes, but they sit on a mighty big face. None too friendly, either. Got here about three weeks ago. New Jersey man, I'd say. His name's Gotter. Frank Gotter."

"What's he do for a living?"

"Looks like a hit man to me, but I couldn't say for sure. Johnnie over at the real estate office says Gotter paid good hard cash for the Dresser place. Rented it for May and June. Johnnie didn't know what Gotter does for a livin'. But Johnnie don't know enough to ask questions."

"Any connection between Gotter and the woman?"

"Well now, I didn' hear any such thing." Jimbo's eyes turned wicked. "What sort of connection you have in mind?"

"None in particular. Just wondered. You know, they both moved in about the same time. A little early for most summer people."

"Well now, don't you just have a point there. Johnnie says the lady rented her place for May with an option for another month. What do you suppose those two are up to out there on that ole empty part of Edisto?"

"Maybe nothing," Pat said, picking up her box.

"Gotter buys weirder stuff than you," Jimbo said, eyeing the wheat bread sticking up out of the box.

Pat slid the box back onto the counter.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Bought bird seed and some fish food."

"So what. Lots of people have pets."

Jimbo shook his head and sent his red-blond hair flying. "This guy's not the type. Know what else he bought?"

"Dogfood?" Pat said, knowing one guess, no matter how lame, would satisfy Jimbo.

"Wrong. He bought seven hamsters. Had me order them from town. They were kinda cute in a ratty way. Now, what's he want with seven hamsters?"

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"Seven does seem excessive," Pat admitted.

"Know what I think. He uses 'em for target practice. A hit man, like I told you."

"Could be you're right, Jimbo." Pat picked up her box of bread and yogurt again and left, wondering what connection ran between seven hamsters and an order of chemicals. What was Gotter doing, and what was the Queen of Sheba photographing?

Pat debated which of her two neighbors she should stake out next Wednesday night and whether she should arm herself with the .22 she had bought years ago in her stint as a P.I. She'd used neither her gun nor her ring of passkeys for years, but she'd kept both partly as memorabilia and partly out of the habit of being prepared for anything.

She debated with herself all evening and finally decided on staking out the woman. She posed less of a threat. Although Pat liked a certain degree of danger, she'd never sought it out deliberately. It came of its own accord, often enough.

She spent the week working on a paper that would keep her on the published and not perished list of faculty members. But she kept her binoculars within reach, and she strolled past her neighbors' as often and as slowly as possible. She saw the queen twice, but never got beyond the usual perfunctory greetings. Gotter left his house on Friday, driving what looked like a stripped ice cream or mail truck. Pat wondered what was inside.

When Wednesday finally rolled around, she tried reading a novel, failed, tried writing, failed, and finally went down to the island's state park for a walk. She collected some sand dollars to contribute to her niece's collection, took a few more pictures of the gravestones she'd found, fought off some sand fleas to get a picture of an osprey bringing home a fish to the nest at the top of a dead tree, and returned home, wondering if the fleas were the concrete manifestations of the curses of the graves' occupants on intruders. That evening she napped, waking periodically, between nine and two in the morning.

At three thirty A.M., she decided to leave the gun in the drawer and, armed with only a flashlight, set out at three forty-five for the clapboard farmhouse. A quarter moon provided some light.

Five minutes later, she had made her way to the woman's property. She skirted round it, moving from the side that faced her own property to the other

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side. From the house halfway to the water's edge, the yard had been cleared of heavy brush. A hammock was strung between two oaks. Beyond that, tall grasses dotted with dwarf palmettos and pines had been left in their natural state. Dwarf pines and cedars cut off her view of Frank Gotter's yard.

Using thickets of myrtle as cover, Pat neared the house. Light shone from one of the windows.

Sheltering behind a dwarf palmetto and breathing in the sweet air of a honeysuckle, she settled in for the wait. From where she squatted, she could see inside the lighted window.

The woman, in a black sweatshirt, sat by a table, her black hair and full golden brown face gleaming in the light from the glass globe of a Victorian table lamp. Her head dropped occasionally, but clearly she was waiting for something. On the table was a contraption of some sort, a cross between a telescope and a movie camera.

Pat gritted her teeth, trying to ignore the sand fleas and the palmetto bugs that lumbered about at her feet. She fervently hoped that the island's diamond-backed rattlers were all searching for moles and other delicacies farther inland.

Edging away from the palmetto and the bugs' lair she had apparently disturbed, she moved behind some bayberry trees, hoping the thick vine wound along their base wasn't poison ivy.

The tribulations of stakeouts came back to her with a vengeance. She estimated ten minutes had passed, but it could have been five.

Pat's back began to ache, and her clothes began to feel clammy. She'd also turned into a human trap for sand fleas, the scourge of Edisto. She considered going back to her own house and minding her own damn business.

Then the scream came.

Pat jerked her head toward the front of the yard from where the scream had come.

The second scream followed just as a door opened on the porch facing the water.

The woman ran down the four steps, moved down the yard toward the beach, paused a moment, then disappeared behind some bushes. She was carrying the contraption.

Pat decided to stay where she was. Her flashlight would give her away if she used it, and she'd only stumble around if she didn't. She would stay put to see when the woman returned and what or whom she returned with.

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Pat listened, trying to sort out the sounds: a dim rhythmic splashing, then some barely audible voices. A few muffled thuds followed. She suspected someone had approached the shore with a boat.

She waited, reminding herself that that's what P.I. work was all about.

Five minutes later the woman returned.

Crouching, Pat crept up to the window. A vine or a twig snapped under her foot, but the crack hardly disturbed the night against the rustle of the trees.

Slowly she raised herself just enough to look over the windowsill into the house.

The woman was fiddling with the telescope contraption. She turned to her right, away from the window, and reached for something on the table.

Pat straightened up for a better look.

The high scream shivered on the air.

Pat stumbled back just as the woman swung round and ran to the window.

For a moment she and the woman stared at each other.

The woman spoke first. "Come inside, please. I've been wondering when you would come."

Pat wished fervently that she'd brought her gun.

"You must have been curious about the screams," the woman continued. "I can explain. If you'd rather not come in, I'll come out."

Still rather in shock, Pat nodded.

The woman smiled. "I'll show you who screams. Come round to the porch."

Half inclined to get the hell out of there, but driven by curiosity, Pat went round. Something about the woman's calm manner reassured her, though she still longed for the cosy comfort of her .22.

At the porch, the woman held out a hand. "Patricia Callens, isn't it? I'm Cecilia Edwards. I was born on Edisto. This is my Aunt Dee's house. I don't always wear black. Just for this job."

"What job?" Pat asked.

"Come. I'll explain."

The woman walked toward the water, then angled off to the left, toward a patch of foliage.

Pat followed but kept her distance, ready to take off running if necessary.

As they approached the foliage, she heard a shuffling noise.

The woman leaned over and patted an animal, iridescent green and blue in the moonlight. "They scream," she said, "at breeding time mostly. In In-

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dia they scream to warn game animals of the approach of tigers and leopards. In Rome they were considered a delicacy, roasted and served in their own feathers, but in India they're a symbol of the god Krishna."

Pat stared at the peacock. "Why does this one scream at four?"

"He hears the sound of a boat, and I think he smells our next door neighbor."

"Gotter?"

Cecilia nodded. She stroked the peacock again. "He had his leg broken by Gotter, who tossed him into a pit to die. I rescued him. His name is Achilles, by the way. I'm a veterinarian."

"Did Achilles spot me at your window?"

"Yes, probably. That's why he screamed."

"And he smells Frank Gotter once a week?"

"Achilles is my alarm. He lets me know when Frank's delivery man is coming in."

"Delivering what?"

"Contraband animals: baby crocs, monkeys, discus fish. Whatever Frank can sell to people who don't care if the species is endangered or not. Achilles was a captive on that boat once."

The peacock strutted elegantly toward a tree. Cecilia laughed. "He seems to know his illustrious heritage. Peacocks are the oldest ornamental birds. They graced the palaces of Mesopotamian kings in 3000 B.C."

Pat looked doubtfully at the woman. "How come I didn't hear a motorboat? And how come Frank doesn't hear the scream?"

"The motor is turned down as the boat approaches, but Achilles' ear is acute. As for Gotter, he thinks he hears a loon. I told him that when he complained. He doesn't know I've been photographing his activities. I'll turn my pictures over to the authorities soon."

"And put Gotter out of business," Pat said. "That explains that telescope thing."

Cecilia nodded. "Special equipment for night photography. Night vision scope with an infrared illuminator. The photos are rather green, but detailed; they'll show enough. Gotter will be out of business. At least on Edisto." Cecilia sighed. "But there are more like him, and anyway, he'll just get a few months and a fine and then start up somewhere else. He'll have money enough."

"From this operation?"

Cecilia nodded. "He'll have earned well over five thousand dollars. I suspect the money is stashed in his house."

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Pat thought fast. She knew now why she'd saved those passkeys. "Cecilia, give me one day to show you what I can do. I've been needing some new work and a way to thank Edisto for not being Hilton Head. Alert me when he's out, and I'll get a nice donation for the SPCA."

She held out a hand. Cecilia shook it. "This," Pat said, "is the start of a beautiful friendship."

Two days later, Pat leaned on the sill of her bedroom window, adjusted the binoculars, and watched a deputy, arms and stomach bulging out of a too-tight tan uniform, carry a mesh cage out of Frank Gotter's house.

That morning, after Gotter drove off, she had broken into the cottage with ease. She had gone to the police shortly after Gotter had returned, and Cecilia had contacted the SPCA.

Now one of the SPCA men, also bulging out of his shirt and pants, no doubt from too much creamy she-crab soup, took the cage from the deputy and lifted it to inspect the birds inside.

Cecilia shifted to get a better view between the top of Pat's head and the window sash. "Mynahs," she said bitterly. "I wonder how many died en route."

Outside, another deputy, young and fresh-faced, brought out a mesh cage, holding it as far away as his long skinny arm would allow.

Pat giggled. "I know how that guy feels. I about fainted when I saw that reptile, and I'm not much given to swooning."

"Here comes another reptile," Cecilia said.

The sheriff came out the back door of the green-shingled house, giving encouraging shoves to a handcuffed Frank Gotter.

Through her binoculars, Pat saw Gotter's lips twist. "A linguist could probably get a dissertation's worth of material on cursing," she said.

"Imagine the creative cursing Gotter could come up with if he ever found out what happened to his money," Cecilia said.

Pat looked smug. She watched the sheriff give Gotter a final shove into the back seat of the police cruiser. One of the deputies climbed into the back with him.

"I suppose we ought to have turned that money over to the police," Cecilia said. "It's certainly illegal to keep it. Besides, they're bound to wonder where the profits went."

"Don't back out now," Pat said. "Gotter is in no position to report the money as stolen,

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and the SPCA is going to need a donation to take care of all those animals. Besides, it took me almost an hour to find it."

"What tipped you off?"

"The nice thick layers of paper on the bottom of the cage. Gotter didn't seem a particularly tidy man, and no other cage had paper on the bottom. I wondered why that damn snake rated special treatment. Clever bastard. I'd have preferred to tackle Gotter himself. That snake has yellow eyes that look positively gratified when they see human flesh.

"But I used a coat hanger I untwisted. It took me ten minutes to tease that envelope up to the front of the cage and another five to realize that the mesh was slit a few inches along the bottom and I could just lift it slightly and slide the envelope out. That damn snake never moved a scale. Just stayed curled up in his corner watching me. I swear he knew the difference between metal and flesh."

Cecilia laughed. "He probably did. Anyway, he might not be poisonous. I should have gone with you. I might have saved you some bad moments."

"You'd done your part of the job." On the grounds below, Achilles opened his tail and strutted across the yard.

"And the third member of our team had done his," Cecilia said.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Superfluous Murder

Milward Kennedy



Illustration by Ron Chironna

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As the train came to a standstill and he alighted from his carriage, John Mansbridge was amazed at the steadiness of his nerves. It was long since he had felt so calm and serene. Perhaps it was because he had reached a definite decision, after weeks of agonized doubt and fear. And yet his decision was not absolutely definite. He did not intend his visit to end in his cousin's murder if there was any hitch, however slight, in his careful yet simple plan.

In accordance with the plan, he engaged the ticket collector in conversation about a mythical parcel which he pretended to have left on the platform on the occasion of his last visit, nearly a month ago. Naturally he could get no news of it, but time enough was occupied to make him leave the station a clear five minutes after the few other passengers who had left the train at Gorse Hill had departed into the night.

"By Jove!" he said to the ticket collector, looking up at the station clock, "is it as late as that? My cousin, Mr. Felix Mansbridge, will be wondering what has become of me, and it will take me a good three-quarters of an hour to walk to his house."

"All of that, sir, on a night like this," said the ticket collector, and bade him a goodnight which was the more cordial for the shilling which was slipped into his hand.

John Mansbridge stepped briskly out of the station and down the country road towards the village. So far, so good. He had clearly established two facts: to wit, the time when he had left the station, and his intention to make his way on foot to his cousin's house.

He walked rapidly to the village and stopped at the Four Feathers to repeat his inquiring about his parcel—there was just a chance, he suggested, that he had left it there. Again he was at pains to establish the time of his visit; it was just on closing time, so he made his drink a short one. To himself he reflected that the whisky would put just the right edge on his judgment.

Then he went on his way, and at the far end of the village called a cheerful goodnight to the policeman on duty there. He smiled in the darkness to reflect that the police system was an integral part of his plan. In something under an hour's time the constable would be relieved, and his relief came down the lonely hill past Felix's house.

He walked on steadily, treading rather heavily to ensure that the policeman heard him, until he had turned the next corner. Then he took to his heels along the grass at the edge of the road,

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climbed a gate on the left, and doubled along a cart track which led back to the other side of the village. He did not follow it to its end, but turned off across a smooth meadow and found his way without difficulty to a tumbledown shed. He pulled the door open and, drawing an electric torch from his pocket, flashed it on the interior before entering. He gave an involuntary sigh of satisfaction—the dust was undisturbed since his last visit; it seemed safe to assume that the presence of the bicycle had not been noticed.

He had taken great pains with the bicycle—bought it second-hand, and yet in good condition, with tires well worn (so that they left no distinctive tracks) and yet with plenty of life in them. The dealer in the faraway Gloucestershire town who had sold it to him had taken no particular interest in the deal, and its transport to Gorse Hill had been effected by slow and unobtrusive stages—the last of them, to the abandoned shed, under the cover of darkness. The heap of loose sand inside the shed afforded an admirable means of covering up all signs of the use to which its shelter had been put.

He repeated his precautions, steeling himself against a tendency to hustle. The bicycle was carefully lifted out of the shed and leant against the wall; the heap of sand was used to conceal the marks of his feet; the heap itself was artistically arranged. Then he carried the bicycle to the footpath beyond the shed and mounted it.

Dark as the night was, he found it easy to follow the track. Thanks to the drought, it was hard and firm and he made good speed. Not only that, he was confident that there would be few, if any, traces of his passage. The wind at his back also helped him on his course.

Nor did he hear or see a soul; the dogs, even at the one farmhouse which he passed at some distance on his right, failed, apparently, to detect him. Almost before he realized it, a dark shimmer told him he had reached his first objective, the pond. He dismounted and, wheeling the bicycle, made his way cautiously to the spot which he had previously marked down as suitable to his purpose—where the bank was covered with short, dry stubble and where, he knew, the water was nearly four feet deep up to the very edge.

He knelt and lowered the bicycle silently into the pond. It was a little more difficult than he had expected, but still, his plan worked smoothly. The bicycle certainly had disappeared; it would be invisible in the dirty water and soon would sink deep into the

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soft mud and slime. So far as he could judge, the surface weeds would not look as though they had been willfully and rather drastically disturbed. Deliberately he did what he could to improve this impression.

But he could not afford to linger; on the second stage of his journey time was of vital importance. He left the footpath, skirted the far end of the pond, climbed another gate, and ran across the field beyond it. From the far side he came in sight of his cousin's house. A soft light shone from the windows of the study, but otherwise there was no sign of life. That was as it should be, the married couple who "did" for Felix were away on holiday and he was being ministered to by a woman from the village who "came in by the day."

John Mansbridge hurried on till he reached the gate at the bottom of the garden. Here he forced himself to pause in order to recover his breath. His heart was pounding against his ribs—this he firmly ascribed to his physical efforts and not to excitement.

Very cautiously he pulled out his watch and flashed his torch on its face. Again he sighed, this time not so much in contentment as because Fate seemed to have committed him to the deed. He had "gained" a good twenty minutes—in other words, he had reached the house some twenty-two minutes before, on the evidence which he had created, it was possible for him to have done so. He was satisfied that he had arrived in entire secrecy, and it had taken him two minutes less than he had allowed.

He opened the gate and closed it behind him so carefully that the latch did not make a sound. He walked swiftly up the path—or rather the grass border—until he came to the lawn. He tiptoed across it towards the windows. They were closed, and the thin red curtains drawn. He leant close to the glass, though careful not to touch it, and with a shock detected the sound of a voice which seemed strange to him. Had all his plan split upon a single rock?

He crept round to the window at the other side. It was open, and though this side was sheltered from the breeze, the curtain had blown sufficiently aside to give him a clear view of most of the room. Simultaneously his lips smiled and his heart gave a fierce thump. The "strange voice" was that of the loudspeaker, delivering a lecture on Babylonian pottery. Apparently it had had the effect of sending Felix to sleep.

He was sitting in an armchair of the "grandmother" variety; its back was towards the door, so that it was sideways to the window

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through which John Mansbridge was peering. His bald head was lodged comfortably on a cushion, and his eyes were closed. His thin hands clasped the arms of the chair. He looked ill and tired, and his cousin felt almost sorry for him, till he noticed also the smug little smile on his lips. On the table beside him were a tumbler and a reading lamp and a paper or two. On a table in the middle of the room stood a tray containing a small whisky decanter, a siphon, and a couple more glasses.

Anger welled up in John Mansbridge. How infernally comfortable and smug Felix was! Always so full of advice and patronage, and at the same time as mean as sin.

All very well to "advise you, my dear John, to settle down to a steady job; give up the nightclub and melodrama existence." As if he didn't know perfectly well that if Felix wasn't so infernally afraid of hurting himself and that heart which he pretended was so weak (as a matter of fact, he probably hadn't got such a thing), he'd have been painting the world red himself. Except that he was so mean. Positively hurt him to spend a halfpenny. Always whining about having no money. Damn it, hadn't he, John, seen the old man's will? He knew damned well that Felix had inherited a fat fortune. And when his only living relative asked him for a hundred or two, to help things along, he said he couldn't do it. Paying off debts of his father's.

Damned lie, that's what it was. Enough to make anyone—well—sign the wrong name on a check. It ought to teach Felix a lesson, but the chances were that it would lead him to suppose that a lecture on morality was called for. All very fine to be honest when you've got more money than you want, and hate spending any of it. Canting hypocrite, that's all Felix was; piously swearing he was a poor man. "All I can do, John, is to carry a large insurance on my life. And I had to pay a stiff price for that—it was all I could do to get the company to accept me at all. My heart, you know. Still, I wanted to do what I could for you, and I'm not likely to live long."

No, he was not likely to live long, but it wouldn't be his heart that finished him off. And when he wrote that note asking his cousin to come and see him one day next week about a "check which he didn't quite understand," he finally settled his own fate. If the shock of what his cousin said didn't polish him off then and there (which wasn't likely; nothing wrong with his heart at all), then something else would. And John Mansbridge felt almost

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grateful to his cousin for being so feeble and flabby; he wouldn't put up much of a fight even for his life.

These thoughts, of a kind which had haunted him for weeks, flashed through John Mansbridge's mind in the second or two which he spent at the window. They served to give him fresh strength and determination.

A new thought suddenly struck him. There was Felix, to all appearances fast asleep. If he crept in noiselessly enough, he might be able to finish him off there, in the chair. It would be easy to fake signs of a struggle afterwards. That Indian club hanging in the hall. But suppose Felix woke up and saw him? Well, it would only curtail the interview. True, he would be sorry not to fire off the speech he had rehearsed, but that was a small point. Damn it, he'd have a shot at it.

He crouched on the lawn and cautiously took off his shoes; he tied the laces together to ease in carrying. He slipped on the gloves which were in his pocket and drew out from his ticket pocket the "spare" latchkey which he had so successfully purloined when last he was down at Gorse Hill. He crept round to the front door, deposited his shoes on the doorstep and, with infinite precaution, slipped the key into the Yale lock. To his satisfaction the door opened silently. He dared not turn on the hall light, but there was sufficient illumination from the half open door of the study to show him all that he needed to see.

There was a faint scrape as he withdrew the key. He paused, but no sound came from the study. A second later the front door was safely and securely closed again. He took down an Indian club (not the first, but the one by the door of the dining room), and tried its weight with a savage grin. Slipping the door key back into his pocket, he advanced silently into the study.

Felix had not stirred—a nice way to welcome your only cousin! There was his bald head temptingly visible above the back of the chair. John stepped forward and swung the club. . . .

That was that. All old scores wiped out. No need to make sure of the result—and no need to look at it. One had done things of the same kind in the war and felt none worse. Funny what a difference there was, all the same. Still, no time to lose. No use getting sentimental. Find the check, that was the first thing. That ought not to be difficult—Felix would be sure to have it at hand, all ready for the interview; probably in the top drawer of the writing desk. He jumped as he suddenly became conscious that the

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voice of the Babylonian expert filled the room, and with an oath he switched off the wireless. Now for the check.

But there was no forged check in the top drawer, and none in any other drawer of the desk. He began to tear envelopes open feverishly; pulled open the cupboard below the bookshelves; even ran up to Felix's bedroom. Where the hell could it be? He looked at his watch and a sick despair seized him. He had only seven minutes left before he must leave the house, and a lot had still to be done.

Good heavens, perhaps it was in Felix's pocket. What a fool not to think of it! Actually he *had* thought of it, but had thrust the idea aside; he didn't want to touch the body. Well, there was no help for it.

In the breast pocket was nothing but a pocketbook. Well, the notes would be useful, anyway. He took them, and thrust the pocketbook roughly back again. Then in the right-hand side pocket of the dinner jacket his fingers detected an envelope. He pulled it out, and involuntarily gave a whistle of surprise. The envelope was addressed to himself, and the flap stuck down. He ripped it open. The check was inside, enclosed, apparently, in a letter. He heaved a sigh of relief, and thrust the envelope into his own pocket. He had meant to destroy the check then and there, but his program must be slightly modified. The change involved only a very small risk.

He put the spare key back in the top drawer of the writing table, from which he had originally purloined it; pushed it well to the back amongst some papers in case its loss had been discovered, and in order to suggest that it had been hidden in the drawer all the time. You could not be too careful of details. Then he went to the front door and wedged it carefully open with the doormat. He went outside and with a stick from the hall smashed a pane of glass in the dining room window. He thrust in his hand, unlatched the window, and opened it at the bottom. He returned to the house and again shut the front door. This time he brought his shoes in with him.

Hastily he pulled open the sideboard cupboard in the dining room, seized some spoons and forks, rolled them roughly in a strip of green baize which was in the cupboard, and tossed the package on the table. That was good enough, he thought.

Then back into the study for the last and most unpleasant job.

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He lifted his cousin's arm with a reluctant shudder, and turned back the hand of his wristwatch until it pointed to about five minutes after the time when he, John, had left the pub in the village. He heaved his cousin's body out of the armchair and arranged it as well as he could to suggest that he had been standing by the fireplace when he was struck. He laid the body on its right side; the left arm he stretched roughly across the fender, and made sure that the blow had stopped the watch. He stood up again and surveyed the room. He knocked over a small chair, but decided that otherwise his own search had produced an excellent representation of a struggle. The club he left lying by the fireplace.

He looked at his watch. All was well. He was within his scheduled time again. He put on his shoes, tying the bows neatly, despite the involuntary trembling of his hands, and made his exit from the silent house by way of the open window in the dining room. His jump carried him clear of the narrow flowerbed below the window, onto the flagged path leading from the gate to the front door. Then he ran round the house, back to the garden gate, across the paddock to the left, and so through a well-worn gap in the hedge, into the lane from the village. At this point it dipped between two hills. He took off and pocketed his gloves and then walked quickly on for about thirty yards up the hill in the direction of the village, keeping to the grass by the roadside. He stopped and drew from his pocket a pipe, tobacco pouch, and a silver matchbox. He filled his pipe and struck one of the wax vestas. The wind blew it out at once, and he threw it aside. He used three others before his pipe was fairly alight, and then he began to walk slowly back, down the hill towards the house. He walked at the side of the road, and made a point of kicking his shoes on the loose stones. He ought to arrive with dusty shoes, and he was by no means anxious for his second approach to be as silent as his first.

He reached the gate and paused in some anxiety. The relieving constable was due to pass at any moment now. The direction of the wind for the first time became a slight disadvantage. However, he must take no risks. He walked to the front door, rang the bell, waited, and rang again. Then he knocked. After a further interval he walked back towards the gate and listened intently. To his joy, he caught the sound of footsteps. He ran back to the house and shouted, "Felix! Felix!" in tones of increasing excitement. He heard the footsteps reach the gate and pause. "Felix! Felix!" he shouted. "Are you there?"

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The gravel scrunched under a pair of heavy boots.

"Anything the matter?" asked a deep, comfortable voice.

"What? Who's that?" John Mansbridge hoped that he had sounded startled.

"Police, sir. What's the trouble?"

John Mansbridge hastily explained his identity.

"This is my cousin's house. Mr. Felix Mansbridge."

"That's right, sir."

"He asked me to come and see him and stay the night—I do from time to time. Keep a pair of pajamas here, don't you know, and I've just walked up from the station and, well—I can't make him hear—or anyone else. I know he's expecting me. And—look at that!" The constable had reached the door and, urged by the excited cousin, peered at the open window.

"Half a minute," he said. "I'll just have a look—"

"Here, I've got a torch," said John and produced his from his pocket. The constable took it with a word of thanks. He flashed it on the window and gave a grunt of surprise. He seemed uncertain what to do next.

Mansbridge thumped on the knocker again; then the two men strained their ears—or one of them did.

"I wonder if one of the other windows . . ." suggested Mansbridge. The constable leapt at the idea and led the way rapidly round the house until he reached the window through which his companion had peered—oh, years ago, it seemed.

"Looks bad, sir," said the constable. "We'd best get round to the front again." Indeed, the study window was too narrow to admit of entrance.

The constable became a man of action. He bade Mansbridge wait by the door while he climbed in by the window, and Mansbridge again reflected with satisfaction that if he had left any traces by either window, the burly constable would have eliminated them pretty completely.

A moment later the door was opened.

"Come in, sir," the constable whispered hoarsely, "and wait outside the room where the light is, if you don't mind. I just want to have a look first."

He walked to the study and half closed the door behind him. John Mansbridge waited for what seemed an eternity, but in fact was only a few seconds. The constable sized up the situation and returned, switching on the light in the hall. The other man had

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been fighting to retain control of his nerves, but he was conscious that sweat was pouring down his face. The constable glanced at him with respectful sympathy and muttering, "Afraid this will be a shock to you, sir," led the way to the study.

John Mansbridge followed; his return to the horrible scene which he had left only a few minutes before seemed somehow to act as a stimulant to his nerves. His performance of horror and shock was a convincing one, and all the time his inner consciousness was gleefully congratulating him upon it.

"How—how did it happen?" he gasped.

"Ah, queer business," the constable answered. "Can't make out what's happened to the room."

"Yes, but Felix—my cousin?"

"Well, that will have to be seen to," was the ponderous reply. "Maybe he smashed himself on the fender there. But it's queer. You see, sir—" he hesitated and then went on "—it's a case of suicide, seemingly. I found this on the table there, with the glass on it."

And he held out a sheet of paper, covered with Felix's writing. John stared at it; how in the devil's name had he overlooked the little table? Of course he found the forged check before he got as far, but . . .

Through the daze which beset him he read the opening words:

"I, Felix Edward Mansbridge, being of sound mind, solemnly declare that I am dying by my own act. I have taken poison . . ."

The room and the paper whirled before his eyes. From a distance he heard the constable say, "I'll just ring up the station." Then a "hallo," but addressed, it seemed, not to the exchange but to himself, and a strong arm lowered him into the very chair where Felix had sat, his bald head just visible. . . .

There was a clink of glass.

"Drink this, sir," said the constable, holding a tumbler to his lips.

"Now let's see where we are," the superintendent addressed the sergeant and the constable; the latter was manifestly uneasy at the prominence into which his part in the affair had thrust him.

"First, let's fix the known facts about this man John Mansbridge's movements. We know the train he came by and the time

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he left the station; we know he was in the Four Feathers just before closing time, and we know he left it and walked past Robson, who was still on duty, in the direction of his cousin's house. There is no turning off the lane, and it's pretty deserted at night. In fact, I doubt if anyone uses it except you, Longden. And about forty minutes or three-quarters of an hour after John Mansbridge left the village, you see two or three matches struck as you come down the hill towards the house. And when you get to the house, you find the man hammering at the door. That correct?"

The sergeant and the constable agreed.

"Right. And I may add that we're pretty sure it *was* Mr. John Mansbridge who lit his pipe, because he carried a box of wax vestas—not so common these days in country villages—and we found no less than four used matches of the same kind just about the spot where Longden here indicated."

The constable perked up a little, as if detecting a word of praise for himself.

"All very well and good," the superintendent continued. "It certainly looks as if the man walked from the station as he said he was going to. Took just the normal time, and his shoes bear out his story. And I don't see how else he could have got there. We may, of course, find someone who met him in the lane, but I should think that unlikely. So much for that."

He paused for a moment, as if to arrange his thoughts in order, and then resumed his lecture (as it seemed to be).

"Now let's consider this Felix Mansbridge. It seems a pretty clear case of suicide to me—" the sergeant made as if to interrupt "—but I admit that isn't what we're supposed to think. What we are supposed to think is this: that someone or other broke into the house, began to steal the silver, was disturbed, caught up that club from the hall, knocked the dead man on the head, after a struggle, and decamped. And the broken watch is to suggest that this happened about five minutes after Mr. John Mansbridge left the Four Feathers and when, consequently, he couldn't be at his cousin's house. I'm afraid I can't swallow that story."

"You're sure he was poisoned, then, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"Perfectly. And that's not all. In the first place, though it's not impossible that he was killed in a struggle, it's surprising—considering that the blow was delivered from behind and from above. Then, secondly, there's his confession of suicide. You see, it pretty well fixes the time."

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"How's that, sir?"

"Why, he talked about his departure from the world to Wagner's accompaniment."

"Crazy," said the sergeant.

"Not in the way you mean. I've no doubt he was thinking of the wireless. You look up last night's programs and you'll find a Wagner item, and you'll see why, in my opinion, he only took the poison ten minutes after the time shown by the broken watch. And, finally, there's the wound on the head. You take my word, the doctors will find that it was delivered after the man was dead."

"But why in the name of—?"

"Sheer accident, sergeant, in my opinion. Result of sticking to a prearranged plan too closely. Whoever used the club believed that Felix Mansbridge was alive—and that means premeditated murder. Why, in the name of whatever you were going to say, should a burglar suddenly stop his burgling to go into the next room and bash in the head of the owner of the house, and then take to his heels, leaving the swag behind? It stands to reason there never was a burglar at all."

"Then who'd you reckon it was, sir?"

The superintendent shrugged his shoulders.

"Strictly speaking, I suppose we ought to lay hands on a suspicious fugitive, an unknown visitor," he said, "but I fancy it would be sheer waste of time. There was only one visitor—the cousin, John Mansbridge."

"But his alibi, sir."

"I know. And I don't see how we're to break it. All I can say is that *somehow* he got there long before he met you, Longden. And as we can *prove* that he got there some minutes at least before Longden found him at the door, I don't think his alibi holds water after all. I admit I don't see how he rigged it, but I'm satisfied that it's a fake."

"You can *prove* it, sir?" the sergeant interposed, in a tone which suggested respectful doubt.

"Certainly. For here's a letter which was found in his pocket. It's addressed to him and dated yesterday. The woman who looked after Mr. Felix Mansbridge said he wrote a letter before she left, but as he hadn't got a stamp he said it could wait till next day. I haven't a doubt this is the letter—no letter was found in the house ready for post, and you can see that this envelope was addressed *and* gummed down. And the woman says he put the letter in the

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side pocket of his dinner jacket—the right side. You'll observe here that if it really was in the right side-pocket it would have been a job to take it out as the body lay, on its right side, in front of the fireplace—in other words, it was taken out before the body lay there. That's a small point, perhaps.

"The main thing is the letter itself—addressed to John Mansbridge, Esq., and found in John Mansbridge, Esquire's, pocket. I suggest that he found it after the writer was dead, and probably before his body lay on the hearth rug. For we know that he didn't take the letter while he was in the house with Longden—and therefore he must have done so a good five minutes sooner, and pretty certainly more than that."

"What's in the letter, sir?" the sergeant inquired.

"A hint of a motive, to put it mildly. It's long; here's the gist of it. Felix says that he has had no answer to his note, and supposes that the cousin cannot face him; in other words, he cannot deny the forging of the check. Felix says it's hopeless. His cousin will never be convinced that he, Felix, is indeed and in truth a poor man—the large sums mentioned in his father's will were swallowed up by the unpaid debt. Nor, apparently, does the cousin believe that Felix is indeed a sick man. So sick that though he isn't likely to die next month the doctors say that he can't live more than a year at the outside. The forgery is the last straw; he's to have no peace in this world, so he'll go to the next, and leave his cousin to inherit his life insurance and what little else there is. And he is not to worry; he will make it quite clear to the police that it was a case of suicide—which, thanks to a special clause, will not invalidate the insurance policy. Oh yes, he encloses the forged check in question, which, he says, he had told the bank is in order. Points to a motive, eh? And makes John Mansbridge's character pretty clear. Thorough wrong'un."

There was another pause.

"I see, sir," the sergeant said slowly. "And you don't think that John Mansbridge got in quite innocently and found that letter—say, five minutes before Longden saw him light his pipe?"

The superintendent shook his head.

"No, that meeting with Longden, like those calls at the Four Feathers and the station, were all part of the man's plan. The pipe-lighting was deliberate—he must have been at pains to observe the exact hour at which Longden walked down that lane. He never thought that out on the spur of the moment."

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Police-constable Longden cleared his throat.

"If I may be so bold, sir, do you mean to say Mr. Felix was dead before this Mr. John came, and that Mr. John smashed his head in, not knowing he was dead already?"

"That's it in a nutshell, constable. How he got to the house in time, and how he got in, I don't know. Perhaps he had a duplicate key, and chucked it away in the grass somewhere. But in my opinion, however he did it he came down to murder his cousin, and to the best of his belief till you stuck that confession in his hands he *had* murdered his cousin."

"Thank you, sir. Then to all intents and purposes he was a murderer?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"Well, sir," and the constable wiped his brow, "that kind of makes things easier. I don't rightly know what you'll do about it, officially like, but I feel easier in me own mind. I can tell you, sir, when I finished with telephoning and found this Mr. John Mansbridge dead in the armchair—well, I didn't know whether I was alive or dead meself. Fancy me trying to help him over the shock of seeing his cousin's corpse by giving him a stiff dose of the very same whisky as his cousin had put the poison in. Act of God like, wasn't it, sir?"

He spoke hopefully, with no intention of irreverence.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



The Sinner's League (Otto Penzler Books, $21) is the fifth Gun Pedersen in one of today's most entertaining action-mystery series featuring a male protagonist: L. L. Enger gives us pulsing action, sympathetic characters, and unusual locales. Gun Pedersen was a celebrated baseball player who lost both his wife and his self-respect in one tragic stroke. It led him to quit the game and move to northern Minnesota to exorcise his demons in semiseclusion. The subsequent years have intensified his sense of loyalty and duty, which is probably why he even considers risking his fragile intimate relationship with Carol when Diane Apple calls. Gun and Diane were once in danger together in a case involving Diane's murdered brother. She's in Minneapolis to write a screenplay based on a bestseller by a local attorney-novelist. Can Gun come down to the city to meet her for old times' sake? Housemate Carol is an investigative reporter who has just begun to uncover a big, explosive story related to a gambling casino on nearby Indian land; she may have put herself in harm's way. When one of the women is murdered, Gun must seek a vicious killer in one place even as he tries to prevent a tragedy in another.

Diane Mott Davidson's Colorado caterer, Goldy Bear, can't even get married without having the occasion marred by murder. **The Last Suppers** (Bantam, $19.95) opens with Goldy at the altar. The organ is playing, the food (which, naturally, she has prepared) is set out in the church hall for the feast to follow. But where is Tom Schulz, the groom? She soon learns that the minister has been murdered at his rural home where Tom was to pick him up on the way to church, and that Tom has been kidnapped. As in her three previous mysteries, Davidson garnishes her tale with mouthwatering recipes. The premise, however, makes this latest entry a much

Illustration by Judith Holman

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heavier meal than the chef's earlier souffles, and fans may find themselves hungry for Goldy's celebrated quips and wisecracks.

Nancy Atherton has written a "prequel" to her popular first mystery, and **Aunt Dimity and the Duke** (Viking, $19.95) is sure to please fans again with its irresistible blend of romance, suspense, and the supernatural. The setting is a Gothic mansion estate in seaside Cornwall to which Aunt Dimity has managed to "spirit" a surprising assembly of characters. There's the duke, intent on restoring his boyhood home to the splendor it had before his profligate father drove it into ruination. There's the curiously staunch household staff and the curiously picture-book prosperity of the villagers. There's the duke's cousin, a famous fashion model and mischief-maker, and her agent. There's the live-in glazier who has come to restore the stained glass chapel window depicting the ancient legend of the lady and the lamp; he's a grieving widower with two delightful and unusual children. There's Emma Porter, a career woman and avid gardener all the way from Boston who is traveling alone because her lover has suddenly married someone else; her planned summer tour of English gardens quickly turns into a commission to restore the duke's chapel garden. And there's finally the memory of Rex Lex, a celebrated rock star who died off the coast several years earlier; and there may be more trouble in paradise still to come. Suspend disbelief all ye who enter here, but definitely do enter Aunt Dimity's magical world.

Having won the 1994 Edgar Award for Best Mystery Novel for *The Sculptress,* British author Minette Walters should win further acclaim for her third novel **The Scold's Bridle** (St. Martin's, $21.95). The novel opens in the small English village of Fontwell when Dr. Sarah Blakeney is called in to examine the body of a wealthy recluse and former patient. Mathilda Gillespie died in her bath, but the elderly spinster was found wearing a family heirloom, a contraption called the "scold's bridle" that was used in medieval times to muzzle a nagging woman. Sarah has seen it on several visits to the old woman, who was proud of her possession. As the townspeople react to the death—apparently with feelings ranging from relief to downright glee—Sarah is surprised to find herself one of the few people who enjoyed her acquaintance with Mathilda. Yet she's shocked when the woman's will is read: Sarah is her beneficiary. This isn't going to help build her medical practice, and the dead woman's daughter and granddaughter are threatening several kinds of trouble. Sarah is plagued by a suspicion that her impoverished artist-husband Jack knew of the bequest. The inspector on the case clearly considers Sarah his prime suspect, while

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she is increasingly reminded that there is still a dangerous killer on the loose. Fans of P. D. James and Ruth Rendell will respond to Minette Walters' deft touch with psychological suspense and appreciate her ability with strong and sympathetic women characters.

Janwillem van de Wetering fans, like me, will be thrilled to discover that Grijpstra, De Gier, and even their aged commissaris are back in **Just a Corpse at Twilight** (Soho, $20). Those of you unfortunate enough not to have discovered this remarkable trio in their younger days as members of the Amsterdam police shouldn't waste a minute in rectifying your oversight. In the eight years since they last appeared, De Gier has run off to a somewhat solitary existence in rural Maine, where he's pursuing his search for the meaning of life. Grijpstra has also retired from the force and opened his own private investigative business. This widely different pair of men, partners for many years, share a bond that goes beyond familiarity or even friendship. Which explains, to a point, why the practical and terse older man immediately flies across an ocean to the aid of the dreamy younger one. And what about the commissaris and his turtle? Ah, you might well ask. But I'm afraid that question, like a description of the reading pleasures in a Van de Wetering mystery, defies a thumbnail sketch. Pick up the book and see for yourself.

Carol O'Connell makes a noteworthy debut with **Mallory's Oracle** (Putnam, $21.95), which introduces several characters sure to make a comeback. Sergeant Kathleen Mallory is the adopted child of a cop and his good wife who rescued her at age ten from a childhood spent on the streets. Louis Markowitz always understood that Kathleen only appeared civilized in order to please her beloved adoptive mother. When Kathleen decided to go into police work after his wife's death, Markowitz pulled strings to have his loner daughter assigned to the computers at headquarters. She was a natural; this was simply a different kind of thieving for her. But Louis is murdered while working on the case of a serial killer preying on old women in Gramercy Park, and Kathleen returns to the streets to find the killer herself. O'Connell has created a wild-child woman who fiercely conforms to a code uniquely her own, reminiscent of the title character in Peter Hoeg's bestselling *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. The supporting characters are etched in fascinating detail, while the multidimensional plot offers tidbits of police procedure, a magician's trade secrets, a psychic's scam, and the downhill slide from poverty to survival in Manhattan door-

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ways. Foreign rights sales in advance of publication promise that *Mallory's Oracle* may wind up this year's international bestseller.

(continued from page 98)

Congratulations to all, of course, and although we're naturally sorry that Charles Ardai didn't win for "Nobody Wins" (hmm), we're glad to report that he will tell us about Bouchercon in the April issue in this space. Be sure to watch for his Guest Editorial.

His story, by the way, was in our Mid-December 1993 issue (we said December before; that wasn't correct).

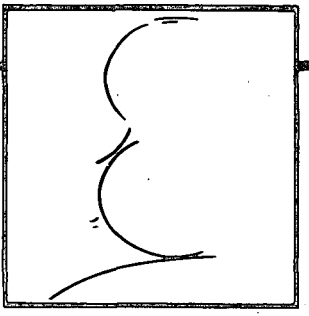
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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



In **Radioland Murders,** Hollywood once again looks to the past with a romantic notion of what good movies were all about. This George Lucas-produced film, from his own story, is set in 1939 at a Chicago radio station about to hit the bigtime as a sparkling new national network.

The station's sleek Art Deco headquarters are quite impressive, as is the recreation of what live radio production must have been like then. Unfortunately, the contrived plot, revolving around a broken marriage, a bad script, and a string of murders, is the weak link in this dizzyingly paced story.

Penny Henderson (Mary Stuart Masterson) is the forceful, if exasperated, secretary for the station's oddball owner (Ned Beatty), a man who calls himself "The General." Although she's a secretary, it's clear from the start, she's really in charge.

Roger Henderson (Brian Benben) is one of the station's writers and Penny's husband. But if Penny has anything to say about it, his husband days are numbered—she caught him in a compromising position with the station's sexpot singer (Anita Morris).

Just as the station is about to go on the air nationwide, the biggest sponsor rejects the scripts for the opening night shows, calling them "the most revolting, insipid trash I've ever read in my life." (A hint to producers and writers: never criticize scripts in a film; your words may come back to haunt you.) The predictable chaos ensues as the writers race the clock to get new scripts out.

The murder mystery begins when Ruffles the trumpet player keels over (actually

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backwards, right into the drumset) at the end of his solo. But even though a half-dozen people at the station are killed during the course of the movie, which takes place on one night, there is little tension or suspense to speak of.

Each of the murders is preceded by a deep, demonic-voiced announcer breaking into the regular broadcast with a riddle. But it's almost impossible to understand what this voice is saying. Eventually, Roger begins to figure out what the clues mean but too late for the victims: the police finger Roger as their chief suspect.

Roger is a very busy character. He's trying to patch up his marriage, write a script, hide from the police, and catch the real killer. The whole movie, in fact, is very busy. The characters are constantly bumping into each other in the hallways, script pages are always flying into the air and getting mixed up. But the constant flurry of activity seems to be taking the place of a clever script.

With the machine-gun action (no, there are no murder victims done in by machine gun—just poison, hanging, electrocution, and falling down an open elevator shaft), there are bound to be some funny moments, and there are, but too much of the dialogue is flat.

Mary Stuart Masterson is convincing as the harried secretary who has taken on the burden of running the whole show.

Brian Benben, as Roger, adopts the facade of a cartoon character more so than the rest of the cast, and is at times out of sync with everyone else.

Scott Michael Campbell, as Billy the ambitious page, stands out with his Jimmy Olsen-like enthusiasm. And a zany-looking Christopher Lloyd is perfectly cast as Zoltan, the station's dedicated sound effects man.

Other notables who appear in the film include Jeffrey Tambor, Corbin Bernsen, Bobcat Goldthwaite, and Harvey Korman, along with George Burns and Rosemary Clooney, who provide entertaining cameos. Michael Lerner does well as the cigar-chomping, fedora-wearing Chicago cop on the case.

The final scene, in which the real killer is uncovered and in which he attempts to elude the law, offers a well-done nod to the memorable ending of a classic oldtime film, *King Kong*. But despite its large crew of mostly good actors, there's just too much static for any of the storylines in *Radioland Murders* to come in loud and clear.

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THE STORY THAT WON



David Hurn/Magnum Photos

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Debbie Shayne of Santa Cruz, California. Honorable mentions go to Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; James Wilson of Saint Helens, Oregon; Gifford F. Cottle of Toledo, Ohio; John Walkington of Lancaster, California; Belita Rennicks of Douglasville, Georgia; Julie G. DeGroat of Theresa, New York; Norman D. Maroney of Reno, Nevada; David Breithaupt of Gambier, Ohio; Pauletta J. Hamilton of Lewiston, Idaho; D. L. Lewis of Rock Hill, South Carolina; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; and J. M. Warrington of San Diego, California.

HOT DEAL by Debbie Shayne

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that crossing the Mojave, midday in August, is a bad idea. On the other hand, certain business transactions supersede reason—meaning when Big Ed calls and instructs, "Five cars. Vegas. Tonight," you go. Maybe you pray for impossible rain, but you go.

You chuckle as your drivers pull out of the garage—this trip will give new meaning to the term "hot cars." Back in the office you rerun those figures; yep, your profit on *this* cool deal will easily exceed the temperature and, hell, it *might* rain.

After lunch, feet up, you turn on the game and nap. Dreaming that the bleacher crowd claps endlessly, you wake and realize that the sound is actually rain hitting the tin roof. Rain! The radio says the sudden storm extends all the way into Nevada. Somebody up there likes you—better call it a day.

Next morning the phone's ringing when you walk in.

"Where're my damn cars?" Big Ed spits into the receiver.

You are ignorant until you unfold the paper and catch the front page headline: "Flash Flood Buries Cars." The picture below tells all: your five cars, swept off the road, with half the desert piled on top of them. You start to explain, but Big Ed has his mind on one thing only: "Five cars. Vegas. Tonight."

You look outside the window and see one cottony cloud floating high.

So there's only one thing to do.

Pray for sun.

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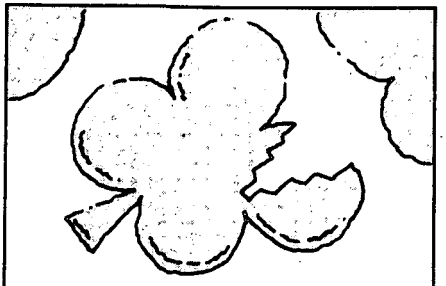
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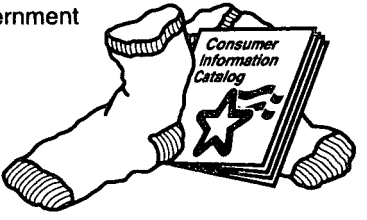
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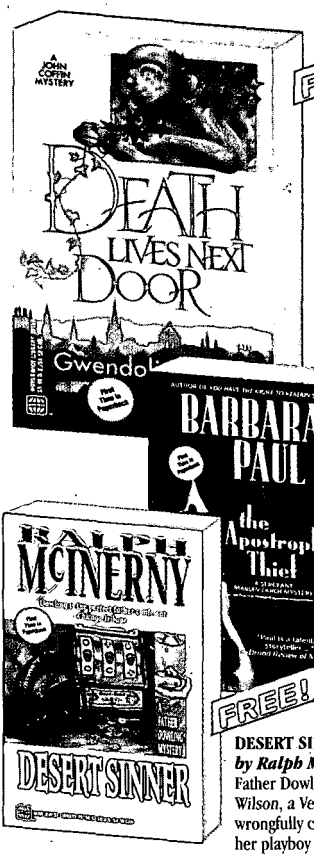
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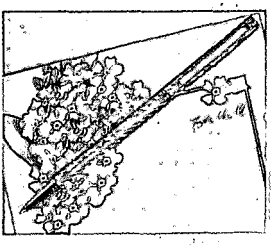
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